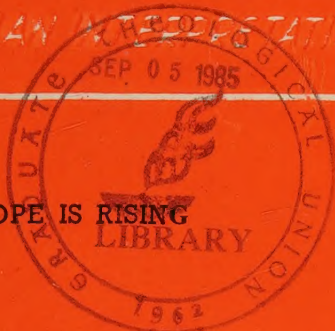


JEEVADHARA

A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

CHRIST OUR HOPE IS RISING



DESPAIR AND HOPE: Harijan Women
Mary Sujitha

DESPAIR AND HOPE: Burnt Out Cases
Philip Manthara

DESPAIR AND HOPE: Non-fighters and Fighters
Mathew Kalathil

DESPAIR AND HOPE: Bagi Tola
Tony Herbert

DESPAIR AND HOPE: The Oraons
Boniface Tirkey

DESPAIR AND HOPE: Myths of the Oppressed
and their Liberative Potential
Joseph Velamkunnel

HOPE SHALL NOT BE BETRAYED
Fernando Cardenal

DEATH AND LIFE
Samuel Rayan

JEEVADHARA

is published every month
alternately in English and Malayalam

GENERAL EDITOR

J. C Manalel

SECTION EDITORS

Thomas Vellilamthadam

The Problem of Man

J. M. Pathrapankal

The Word of God

Samuel Rayan

The Living Christ

Kuncheria Pathil

The People of God

John B. Chethimattam - Thomas Kochumuttom

The Meeting of Religions

Felix Podimattam - Thomas Kalam

The Fulness of Life

SECTIONAL BOARD OF EDITORS

Cyril Mar Baselios

Thomas Mampra

Bosco Puthur

Cyprian Illickamury

Christopher Duraisingh

George Keerankeri

Felix Wilfred

EDITOR - BOOK REVIEW

J. B. Chethimattam

(Contd on inside back-cover)

JEEVADHARA

The Living Christ

CHRIST OUR HOPE IS RISING

Editor

SAMUEL RAYAN

Theology Centre
Kottayam - 686 017
Kerala, India

CONTENTS

Editorial

- Despair and Hope: Harijan Women 167
Mary Sujitha
- Despair and Hope; Burnt Out Cases 178
Philip Manthara
- Despair and Hope: Non-fighters and Fighters 184
Mathew Kalathil
- Despair and Hope: Bagi Tola 192
Tony Herbert
- Despair and Hope: The Oraons 196
Boniface Tirkey
- Despair and Hope: Myths of the Oppressed 203
and their Liberative Potential
Joseph Velamkunnel
- Hope shall not be Betrayed 213
Fernando Cardenal
- Death and Life 235
Samuel Rayan

Editorial

We stand at the confluence of death and life. The sweet and the bitter waters flow in, meet and mingle without ceasing. Situated there, we nevertheless make our option. Hope is the option we make for life; therefore it is also the decision we make to deal with death in all its forms. Hope is the conviction that life will win and become free, and that death can be made to serve it. The foundations of this hope is God, God's deeds and God's promises. Such is creation, the primal gift of life and promise of its fulness. Such too is liberation from captivity: it bestows freedom and the assurance of freedom's final blossoming. Such above all is the coming of God into our history in Jesus Christ, and his intervention in raising Jesus from the dead. God has placed Jesus at the confluence of death and life. Right at the heart of the eddy where the waters clash and swirl Jesus rises like a lotus, red and white, slain yet alive, wounded and loving. He is our hope, and the hope of the everlasting hills; he and the many lotus buds that emerge from the tangled currents of meaninglessness and meaning; buds washed in blood, washed in sunlight.

This issue of *Jeevadhara* is about hope, about Jesus and about people. It is about the daily battle being waged between death and life in big and small measures, in many hidden ways. It is about the way life holds on and refuses to give up. There are six stories about people here in India, followed by a personal testimony from far away Central America and concluding with a reflection on hope and Jesus. But the stories too are about Jesus. They are stories of hope and of despair. The two go together. Sometimes the one predominates, sometimes the other. And often it is no easy task to tell the one from the other. What gives the oppressed and suffering people the strength to live from one day to the next? 'It is very difficult to answer that question', says Manthara. 'It is difficult to know what keeps them going', agrees Tirkey. 'Hope is elusive', adds Sujita. 'Is their hope the same as the hope that we (the Christians, the elite) are thinking of?', she asks. Tony discovers that the people's hope is 'that intangible something there that they seem to have' and the like of us fail to grasp. Kalath

seems to be groping for the line on which hopelessness ends and hope begins. Despair and hope constantly come to birth from each other. We are not living in a beautiful world of pure hope and life. Our roses have thorns. We cannot kiss the rose without getting thorn pricks, and we cannot bleed in detaching a thorn without being caressed by the rose. Those who are reflecting for us the people's despair and hope are women and men living with the poor, working with the marginated, committed to the resurrection of the Harijans, the Musahars, the Chamars, the Bhils, the Oraons, the landless, the bonded, the raped, the abused, the exploited. They mirror for us a little of the people's life as lived. We are also allowed to have a glimpse of the myths which operate behind the stage forging subtle chains for the spirit or shaping swords that sever the chains. Velamkunnel leads the way.

There may be little of formal theology here, little of systematic reflection. But there are brief records of experience. Significant bits of life with the peoples. And that is the matrix of theology. God is with the people, always with the oppressed, in the places and situations where they are, where they suffer and love and refuse to give up. It is from there, from there alone, that the message of life and liberation comes. Suffering, loving and living people are the locus and source of theology. Those too who have thrown their lot with the oppressed of the land may be able to articulate this lived word.

The letter of Fernando Cardenal is a document of hope. Cardenal, now Minister for Education in the Nicaraguan Government, wrote this letter to his friends a little before his dismissal from the Society of Jesus. It is a document of rare spiritual depth, theological insight and quite strength, a witness to christian clarity and courage, a refusal to bend the knee to idols, a single-hearted commitment to God within God's historical demands.

In the concluding piece S. Rayan reflects on the dynamics of the hope of the poor. A dialectics of hopelessness and hope is here operative. The hope of Jesus is a new horizon which embraces our despair and death as well as our myriad particular hopes which open in the mornings and fade as the day declines.

1. Despair and Hope:

Harijan Women

1. Hope is elusive

At present I live with two friends in a Musahar village in Bihar, sharing one of the Musahar huts. Musahars, as the name indicates, are known for catching and eating rats. They are the lowest among humans, both socially and economically. They constitute 2% of the total population of Bihar and number above 1,200,000. They are almost 100% illiterate. Pig-rearing is a common occupation among them. They are a group struggling for survival.

In this article, I also speak about Chamars with whom I have lived and worked for several years. Chamars are traditional leather-workers. In Bihar, they constitute 4.2% of the state. The majority of them are landless agricultural labourers. The Chamar women are actively involved in agricultural labour. The literacy rate among the Chamars is very low. In rural areas the illiteracy rate among Chamar men is 88.54% and among women it is 98.9%. They are a much exploited group.

I live surrounded by poverty, filth, and misery. I find it almost a contradiction to this setting to write on 'hope' among the less fortunate and seemingly 'hopeless' sisters of mine. My two companions and I spend our days just being with them, listening, learning, sharing and reflecting. Last Monday as we began our regular house visiting, Karma Devi, a 45 year old Musahar woman, invited us to her little, dilapidated mud hut. (Musahar houses are small one-room, mud-structures with thatched roofs. To have a door is a rare luxury). As we sat next to her she said: "Didiji (Sister), with God's grace I lack nothing". I was taken aback by her remark, "I lack nothing", for as

far as I could see she "had nothing". She noticed my bewilderment and invited me to see the inside of her hut and explained enthusiastically: "Didiji, we have a better house than some of the other Musahars. It doesn't leak too much. Four of us can easily sleep in this corner. Over there in that corner, we keep our two goats and just over there we keep our pigs. These are our "Kottilies" (clay containers for wheat, rice etc). I made them a few years ago." Distracted by the stench of the pigs and the pitch darkness there and listening to her enthusiastic comments, I reached out into the 'Kottilies' to see how much grain she had collected for the coming months. Not even a single grain! "Karma didi, how come that your Kottilies are empty?" I asked. She replied casually, "Oh, I never had any grain in that. We gather enough for the day." I who believe and preach Divine Providence and God's concern for me failed to understand her, and so I asked again, "Didi, what will you have for supper tonight? It is already 6.30 p.m." Karma Devi really defeated me with a sincere smile (a smile that questioned the very core of my hope, my trust in God) and replied, *Ho jayega*. Oh, everything will be all right. Soon my husband will return from work, and he will bring some rice and potatoes for our supper." Well, that was all I could take from her then! My daily encounters with women like Karma Devi and other harijan women have really shaken up my ideas of 'hope'. Hope is an elusive term for me.

2. Harijan and woman: doubly oppressed

Whatever I share in these pages has come out of my actual, lived experience among the Musahars and the Chamars. Living with them, sharing their agonies, joys and life itself, I have come to love, respect and admire these sisters of mine who do not have any external power or possessions to place their hopes in. To get a glimpse of their 'hopefulness' amidst their "hopelessness", I interviewed and observed several women and girls who shared with me in their own way what hope or hopelessness means in their lives. For the Musahar children of our village, we conduct a non-formal two hour class under the

trees every morning. These children never go to school and their whole childhood is spent looking after the younger siblings, taking care of the pigs and goats, cooking, gathering food items, etc. One of our 'non-formal' students, the seven-year-old Sumitari, is already an 'adult' with full time responsibility for looking after her two younger ones and preparing the meal as both her parents are out the whole day in search of work and food. Sumitari goes out daily to graze the pigs, carrying the youngest one on her hips and leading the second one by the hand. Sumitari — a seven year old woman and mother! In spite of all this, she manages to attend our class faithfully. All through the class she keeps the youngest one in her lap as she struggles to learn to read and write. Once I asked her why she still wanted to learn. Her spontaneous answer was: "Didiji, last year the contractor cheated my mother after she had carried mud for ten days. She can't calculate her wages or write her name. I want to learn to write my name and calculate my wages". So saying, she lifted her slate with her name written on it and the number 10 written next to her name. When asked about the number, she casually replied, "Oh, by the time I am married I hope to get Rs. 10 per day as my wages." What exactly is she hoping for?

Our little 12 year old Kaushilia, a Musahar girl, is already engaged. When asked about her hopes for the future, she replied, "Who is worried about the future? We poor are only bothered about earning and eating Today!" (*Aaj Keliye kamana khana!*) After a little pause she added, "Soon I will be going to my in-laws' place... Who knows what will happen to me? If they don't like me, they will beat me and chase me out. But with the blessing of the gods, I hope my husband is a good man. I want to have at least some good children who can support us in our old age. We will work together and make enough to eat. If we can make enough money, we will buy some clothes for our children. Hoping to elicit a long list of her life's ambitions and hopes, I asked her, "What would you do when you have achieved all these?" Quite surprised at my question she replied, "Well, what else is there to hope for?"

The Chamar women and girls also are pre-occupied with the need for *Kamana-Khana* — earning and eating. They too struggle for survival and dignity. Once a young Chamar girl, Urmila, told me that only after marriage, when she reached her husband's place did she realize that her husband was blind. She tried to run away to her own home. But her father who had three more girls to marry off, brought her back to her husband where she was given a good beating. After much crying and fighting, Urmila made up her mind to start working in the fields to earn for her blind husband and sick in-laws. Today she is the happy mother of four children. Neither her husband's blindness nor her grinding poverty and rejection by her own people have destroyed the 'hope' in her. Her hope is in Life. Her final words as we parted was, "Didiji, God will never forsake us. I went hungry all my childhood. As a young girl, the landlord's son raped me. At the age of 14, I was deceived by my parents who found a blind husband for me. But somehow I am still alive, and today I am not afraid of hard work or pain. My family has two meals a day. In God's house there may be delay, but no darkness!" That was much more than what I expected from a poor suffering village woman. As I walked back into my house, many questions throbbed in my mind. Why didn't Urmila commit suicide? Why didn't she run away from her miserable home? How can she still smile and believe in God's care for her? How?

A seventy year old Musahar woman told me that she is waiting to go back to God as all her life's desires are fulfilled. She said that with God's grace, out of her 12 children four survived; and now they have their own children and grandchildren. What more is there to see? I want to die. If God doesn't take me to himself then I will have to wander around as a spirit. After all I am only a Musahar woman!

3. Hope: Life

One thing is certain: these illiterate, exploited, tradition-bound women are surely hopeful in the midst of

the most hopeless situations in which they live. They cannot verbalize their hopes so easily. But they live it. Their smiles, their songs, their celebrations and even their tears proclaim it. Their hope has a meaning and a dream. It is not based on the painful past or in the future which never seem to exist for them. But their hope is in Life-Life Here and Now. There is only one moment of hope: Now! Life! Yes, their hope is in being. It is hard for us to understand this 'hope' because our hope often is in things to come—in the future. What is hope for us, Christians, Christian women?

Hope is the other side of the coin of hopelessness. Let us listen to our Harijan sisters once again who tell us about their struggle with hopelessness. A newly married Chamar girl Kunti, told me: "I want to eat poison and die. My husband and his entire family is bonded to Rajputs since the time of our greatgrand-parents. I have also become a bonded labourer because of my marriage into this family. We have no land, no regular income. Two days after my coming here, the landlord took me forcibly to his house and used me for his pleasure and no one raised their voice against him. Now I have lost everything. It is better to die!" She put her head down and wept bitterly.

4. Despair

My little friend Tetari, an eight year old Musahar girl, was the only one to attempt going to school. But after two days of school, she was literally thrown out of her class by high caste children because "she was a dirty, stupid Musahar girl who should be tending pigs." Even the teacher discouraged her from coming to school. In her humiliation and pain she swore to me, "I will never study again. School is only for the rich and high-caste who have nice clothes. When I am married and have children, I will never send them to school. After all by reading and writing, my stomach won't be full."

In a Chamar village, I once saw a landlord dragging a sickly widow out of her bed to do weeding in his

paddy fields. This woman returned in the evening without her promised wages of Rs.3, because her landlord wanted to teach her a lesson! The angry woman fought with her mother-in-law and beat her little son for no apparent reason except deep frustration. The entire family went to bed sad, angry and hungry, 'never wanting to wake up' as she put it.

I can narrate several such true stories which have touched the very core of my Christian vocation - my womanhood - my being. I have seen widows being persecuted; girls sold for a few rupees; newly born little girls put aside hoping death would descend on them; women giving birth in the fields because the landlords did not give them a few days off even to have their babies; women subjected to untold humiliations and rejection by the family and village because they are childless; women beaten up by their husbands for giving birth to a girl child...Yes, the list is endless, and such are the miseries of these women.

Just the fact that she is a woman comes in the way of her self-realization. Who is this woman? Why does she look forward to life? A harijan woman, especially the Musahar or Chamar woman is never seen as an individual. She is a daughter, a wife, a mother.... always in relation to a man and dependent on him. As a girl she is referred to as a "burden" for the family. And yet she carries a heavy burden all her life. She is an insult! To call a high caste woman Chamarin (a Chamar woman) is considered to be the greatest insult for her. There are several incidents of newly married chamar women being forced to yield to the lust of the high caste men. The young girls and women of these groups are scolded by the elders, even by their mother, if they look attractive, wear clean clothes and comb their hair; for by doing so they may 'seduce' men. No choice of looking good or feeling good! To look attractive, to have a hearty laugh, and to be clean are not their lot because it creates problem for men! A lot of burden is placed on her, and she is robbed of her dignity and selfhood as she is treated as

a nobody. This creates a very low self-image in her. In spite of all this what keeps her going?

Just being an ordinary "village sister" this word hope is beyond my understanding especially when I took at it in connection with the life of my harijan sisters who are seemingly 'floating' in hopelessness. (I say floating and not drowned!) But in spite of all this insecurity, exploitation, social and economic deprivation, absolute powerlessness, hunger and rejection, these women live and they want to live. They are a hopeful people. If they had nothing to look forward to from the here and now of life, they wouldn't exert themselves and being inactive they would be unhappy. But they are a people who can still smile, still sing. Their hope is not waiting for something to happen in the future, but for their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter, for acceptance and love, for recognition as 'someone' with dignity. Hope, therefore, is a necessity, and these women know that more than any one of us whose hope is hooked on to the 'hope-filled' possibilities of life. There seems to be more room for hope in them because they somehow have learnt to live with pain, failure, poverty and insecurity from their childhood on. When everything is well arranged, thoroughly planned, all security measures taken to assure good results, when everything is clean and clear I feel very hopeful — life looks meaningful to me! But is that hope? There is meaning in hope only when one hopes in the face of hopelessness. Hope is not a thing of the future. For our Harijan women, hope is in Being, and not in achieving.

5. Coping with frustration?

The harijan women have their own ways of coping with frustration. Most of them feel that nothing can be done about their present situation and the oppressive and dehumanizing social, economic and other forces in society. By wailing their sorrows and problems, many village women ventilate their feelings of frustration and powerlessness. The villagers listen to them and console them.

Some of them take refuge in drinking. This is often the case with the Musahar women. Many village fights and feuds stem from this hopelessness and helplessness, one feels. Drinking, fighting, weeping aloud etc. seem to help them forget the harsh realities of daily life.

Religious practices, myths and celebrations also help them to begin again, accept people and situations even after things have gone wrong and one has lost everything. Most of their myths associated with their early history clearly state that once they were a happy, wealthy free people equal to the caste hindus. But due to the deception and cruelty of the rich and powerful upper castes and also due to fate they were gradually reduced to a very low social and economic status. They seem to look 'backward' in hope — backward to their glorious past. Hardly any of the Chamar or Musahar women can explain the meaning and objectives of most of their feasts and celebrations. All of them agree that it is traditional in their culture to celebrate certain feasts. For example, during the *Jitiya* festival the women fast for a whole day and pray for the welfare of their children. A festival like *Holi* gives them an opportunity to break out of their regular social norms and to use their creativity and freedom and to feel good, being clean and being able to eat something special and to celebrate as a community, singing and dancing together. But here again she is forced to work doubly hard on every feast whether it is cooking or cleaning.

She also takes refuge in *Ojhai* — chasing out the evil spirits — who come in the way of her happiness. *Ojhas*, witch doctors, are more powerful than priests and doctors in healing people from the power of evil. Even barren women are treated by the *ojha*. For the harijan woman every illness, especially illness like epilepsy is due to evil spirits — 'Boot'. And so everything is done to chase away the evil spirit and regain health. She has tremendous hope in 'Witch Craft' or *ojhai*. Daily *Puja* or daily prayer are not commonly seen among them. Every religious and social celebration is communitarian and it creates an atmosphere of unity, togetherness and reconciliation.

It is true that daily prayer or *puja* is not in their way of living. But there is an unseen attachment to God's care for them. Bengali Manghi is a poor Musahar who lives right next to our hut. One day I went into his house to see his wife who was sick. He has a tiny room six ft. by eight ft. which accommodates him, his wife and their four children, plus a buffalo. That day and the previous day, they had not cooked anything as both of them were too sick to work and earn. Though it was shivering cold, there were no warm clothes or any cover for that matter. There was no food, no grain.... Well, with the exception of a little salt on a plastic dish, there was *nothing*! Standing there, looking at that house, filled only with emptiness and destitution, my whole being rebelled against a society which reduces people to this state. I kept wondering how and why a 'good God' could permit this? As I stood there putting my arms around the mother of these four hungry children, Samacharia, her eyes welled up with tears and she said softly, "Didiji, don't feel bad for us. Everything will turn out well in God's time. There are smiles, songs and joy even in this family. What is the secret of their togetherness? Their songs? Their smiles? As I left that room that day a Danish Proverb came to my mind, "Hope is the poor man's income." — an income which comes from within. When everything is hopeless and no one seems to be around to lean on, hope becomes a reality — a struggle. How many of us can honestly say that we have experienced this hope? We usually hope for things which we know can be realized. They hope in the face of hopelessness. They become more spontaneous in such a hope. But then is it the same hope that we Christians are thinking of? Hope is the assurance that what is in the depth of me comes true. It is the realization that life will be filled. Hence there is a need for external things like the fulfilment of basic human needs, health, education, acceptance etc. One's greatest hope is to be fully human, to be fully oneself with dignity and freedom, to be recognized and accepted as 'someone'. Any kind of self-realization is the fulfilment of hope.

Our harijan sisters have nothing much to hand on to, to hook their hope on. They don't believe in life insurance either. But hidden within them is a deep indestructible faith in life and they look forward to life as a pregnant woman waits for her baby. And that is hope! They hold on to life. Life cannot fail. Giving life, living, sharing becomes their experience of hope. Even the most seemingly despondent of these women cherishes a secret, obstinate hope that she may one day prove to be 'special' and become the object of love, acceptance and admiration.

6. Reasons for hoping?

What is our Christian responsibility to these struggling sisters of ours. Jesus obviously wasn't too happy or satisfied about the society of his time. Neither can he be happy about our present society where untold dehumanizing conditions prevail. Jesus announced a new Kingdom, a new society which was to be led by the Holy Spirit — a new society where love rules, where people are united as brothers and sisters in mutual concern, justice and peace. Jesus promised that 'Yours is the Kingdom...' 'You are children of God.' The Kingdom is in us, in our brothers and sisters already. If we believe this we cannot sit back just offering prayers for these less privileged sisters of ours, or distributing milk powder, clothes and medicine or criticizing the societal structures which create such misery. No, we need creatively and concretely share our hope with these our sisters — hope that is rooted in the Kingdom, values proclaimed by Jesus. This is a hope that grows through the experience of mastering helplessness and hopelessness in the daily, concrete problems of life. It is not just an otherworldly, future hope. It must become a reality here and now. Like Jesus, we must build on what is already in these sisters of ours, as daughters of God.

The church is challenged today to initiate a new society as envisioned by Jesus. This means our bold and courageous involvement with the poor and a real solidarity with them in real life lived with them. We are challenged to break through the countless social taboos and to reach

out to our Harijan poor, especially the women to initiate among them a new thinking, a new living, a new beginning. Today, in India, our call to mission is to people who cry out often silently for selfhood, dignity and freedom. "If Yaweh is always on the side of the oppressed" (Ps. 103:6), then where should the Church be? But to be on the side of the poor means experiencing their lot in our lives with them. While being with them we become God's sacrament of love, and acceptance for them. This is the meaning of being Jesus today -- being His hopeful Presence among our struggling people. It is in the goodness of the other that one sees God and touches God. This is the effect of witnessing: to be the visible, audible, tangible Presence of God who *loves and cares* even when everything fails. This calls for a tremendous openness not only to the Spirit but also to our poor brothers and sisters to whom we are sent. We cannot communicate or witness a God whom we do not *know* and likewise we cannot communicate to a people whose lives we have not touched with our lives, whom we really do not know and love as brothers and sisters. This means actual living with the poor no matter who they are and where they are. The hope of life which they want to share with us, which we want to discover in them and to build on it like a grain of wheat which appears to be dry and lifeless. We are challenged to nurture this grain of wheat in them, believing in its hidden newness of life and growth and to call forth this Life with the Power of the Presence which Christ has given us.

"The future of humanity lies in the hands of those who are strong enough to provide coming generations with reasons for living and hoping." (*Gaudium et Spes* 32)

Mary Sujita

2. Despair and Hope:

Burnt out Cases

In the last few years I have been working with the poor of Bihar — tribals, harijans and backward classes. When I speak of their hope or lack of it I am speaking of what I have seen at close quarters.

1. Burnt out life

An incident, a very pathetic one, comes to my mind quite often. A couple of years ago two harijans (musahars) lost their huts in a fire accident. It was summer and as usual the people slept out in the open. The fire broke out and swallowed up the two houses in a very short time. Shyamlal lost the buffalo he got through a loan from the bank. Devki and Shyamlal had nothing left except the loin clothes they were wearing. Devki sat by the side of his burnt hut and wept the rest of the night and the following day. He and his family had not eaten anything. Many people stopped by to see the misery and went their way. His landlord too came. He also saw the misery but passed by. Then a fellow-musahar came that way from Sikandarpur, the next village. He was with the broken-hearted Devki for a while, then he went back to his village and returned with a bottle of country liquor for Devki. Of all the men who came there this man understood the depth of hopelessness Devki was in and the only sensible thing to do was to make him forget his misery even if only momentarily. Devki drank the liquor and became oblivious of all that had happened. He woke up the next morning, feeling, may be, a bit better to face the hopelessness of his life.

Devki had hitherto no experience of someone coming to help him build a house or share his grief. He had to bear the burden of the family ever since he was a

child. "I started earning at the age of six", he says. Not only he, everyone in his community (village) had the same experience. "Why our village? Our whole clan has no other experience than fending for itself or simply starving to death", he says.

In fact if anyone came to his village anytime it was to get cheap labour, to buy their pigs and chicken and liquor. I have seen landlords coming to these villages as early as five o'clock in the morning, with their long sticks, to herd the workers to their fields. The harijans work many more than the stipulated hours and never get the statutory minimum wages. If all the family go out to work they may earn enough to eat. In times of great distress, like when someone is seriously ill, they borrow money from the landlords. The conditions imposed are impossible to fulfil and unable to pay the money back, the poor are forced to accept the state of bonded labourers. This usually continues for generations. Thus many are reduced to a state of total dependence on the landlord. They are nothing but slaves. In distress their children also go out to gather food as soon as they are able to walk—they glean potatoes, glean the fields after the harvest. As they grow a bit bigger they learn fishing and digging out rat holes to take grain that rats might have stored up for themselves.

In the musahar villages, no one has gone to school in the past, no one is going now. "I am the fourth generation of bonded labourers", says Bishun Dayal Paswan, "How could I go to school? Can my children go to school now? Unless we all earn what shall we eat?" Children die young. "I had eight children; and I have three now, the others died young", says Rampatia. So the "past was very bleak, the present is no better. Can the future be far different?" asks Bhotti Manjhi.

Then the question is raised as to what gives them the strength to live from one day to the next. It is very difficult to answer that question. They have the basic instinct to survive. They have their little joys, and celebrations, and the drinks that help forget the hopelessness at least

for the time being. That they have to be resigned to the given reality is internalised and accepted. This is the only way they can manage to live their life now.

2. Signs of hope

Let us follow up Devki and Shyamlal. A couple of days after the fire incident we had a meeting of the village cooperative society. During the meeting the people brought up the case of the burnt houses. The people discussed the matter and agreed among themselves to re-build the two houses. Each one offered to contribute what he could. For instance a man brought a bamboo he had bought, one which was badly needed to repair his own house, another brought some grass for thatching, a third some rope and so on. We fixed a day to gather together. All came, joined hands and minds, and by the end of the day two beautiful huts had come up — better ones than those gutted. We had an informal reflection. Many were overwhelmed by what they could accomplish by themselves. "Our unity is unbreakable", said one. I did not think it was that unbreakable; but the experience was very positive — the experience of united effort that made the impossible. Everyone present felt that it was a unique experience. Devki and Shymalal were overwhelmed. They never imagined that such solidarity and timely support would be forthcoming on their behalf.

We have had many such instances, small and big. My experience is that when the poor people individually and collectively feel that others care for them, love them, then they begin to see signs of hope. When the people are left to be exploited and that is their only experience, they get discouraged, and develop a negative self-image and give up making any attempt, thinking that they are good-for-nothing.

Once we were staying for a few months in a village. In one of the meetings of women we asked how they felt about the many programmes like adult education, children's classes, etc. Shankuri Musamat is a very articulate woman. She said, "People usually come here to take us to work,

buy our chicken cheap, but they treat us as dirty, good-for-nothing people and they abuse us. But ever since you people have come we are very happy. You sit with us, listen to us, treat us with respect and love. We feel very happy; we are somebody! please stay on with us." Similar has been my experience in many places. When we have gone to the poor people, whether they are harijans, backward classes or tribals, and stayed with them, listened to them, taken part in most of what happens there, including their struggles, and thus shown our genuine concern, the people become alive to themselves and show interest in life. Slowly they begin to understand their predicament and begin to nurse visions of a little better life, and hope to realize some of these and begin to see a future for themselves, their kids and their kind. A group of bonded labourers who had believed that bondage was a legitimate system and that it was their lot to accept all that went with it, shook it off when they realized that they could be free. Now, ten years after that, they are still growing in appreciation of their freedom. But then some people "from outside" had to offer solidarity and support to create this awareness.

We have a milk-producers' cooperative. Its members are very poor people. At regular intervals the people come together to discuss their problems and to solve them collectively. In many cases they manage to benefit from the government schemes, without giving bribes and being harassed, because they act as a group. When individually they feel helpless to handle the problems of life, collectively they feel mutually supported and strong. A group of musahars who were frightened of even talking to a low-ranking revenue officer took a procession out all by themselves to protest against an instance of injustice against them. After the event they were proud of what they did.

Today a number of the poor children go to attend the non-formal educational programmes for a couple of hours that can be spared from grazing pigs and buffaloes. These are the first generation learners. Some of the children

are quite bright. Five years ago neither the parents nor the students saw any meaning in this. Now both parents and children experience it as holding some vague promise. But then it took five years for the social animator to awaken this sense in these "hopeless" poor and help fan into flame the small embers of hope that have been lying beneath the ashes of their burnt out humanity in an oppressive system. Our own hope has increased. It has been a mutually enriching experience.

3. Christian responsibility

When the Israelites were in Egyptian slavery they experienced both helplessness and hopelessness. To this Yahweh responded, "I have heard the cry of my people." He sent Moses to liberate his people. Hitherto they were oppressed. Now they would be liberated from their oppressors. Hitherto they were landless. Now they would possess land. There was hope generated of living in prosperity and peace. The people struggled and Yahweh stood by them like a rock reassuring them. It is the same experience of reassurance that Yahweh offers Israel during her long history. In times of hopelessness the prophets reassure them with the promise of a Messiah.

Once the Messiah appears on the scene he associates himself with the marginalised and those left by the way side. All his activities are directed towards the restoration of man's lost humanity. He restores hope among sinners, prostitutes, lepers, the physically handicapped, tax-collectors and other sections of society that need reassurance. His constant concern is to share the Father's unconditional love with those deprived of love and hope. But once the people experience this love of the Father they are to work for the spread of His Kingdom, through the effective communication to others of the values of freedom, fellowship and justice.

The resurrection of Jesus symbolises new life, new hope, a new community of sharing, support and challenge. This new community can grow with every experience of the Lord's love. As a result of this experience new hopes

begin to blossom and the community discovers newer ways of extending this hope in wider and wider circles. Freedom, fellowship and justice find concrete expression and Christian responsibility matures as wider and deeper experiences are shared.

I see this responsibility at two levels: First, we must examine ourselves and see that we are not supporting the present oppressive structures. Are our interests, tastes, and values those of the Kingdom or something else?

The second level will be to offer our solidarity and support to the poor, to those who have no hope. In the present scheme of salvation the only way the poor can experience God's love is through the actions of those who claim to have experienced God's love, hope etc. The values of the Kingdom have to be made to live in human communities. This can generate new hopes. Only when Devki, Shyamlal and many like them experience love, fellowship, justice and freedom through their neighbours can they experience hope. Will they discover that their neighbours offer some solidarity and support to get minimum wages, a small house to live in, some clothes to wear, some respect from their fellow human beings, some opportunities for development for oneself and one's children? Will someone stand by when they are about to cast their votes so that they can vote in freedom for the person of their choice? Will someone come to their aid when some landlord decides to burn their huts? Can some of us see enough hope in a dirty child to reach out to him and not get distracted by the dirt he is covered with? There are myriad ways of stirring up hope and strengthening visions. How else could one build up the Kingdom?

In conclusion the question I would like to ask is not whether the poor have hope or not, but whether we entertain any hope for humanity. If we claim that we have experienced God's unconditional love that has generated hope in us for ourselves, then are we willing to share this love with those who have been deprived of it? What else is Christian responsibility? Are we ready to take it up?

Philip Manthara

3. Despair and Hope: Non-fighters and fighters

1. Manilal content with the little

Manilal Reva Tadvī, a resident of Sultanpura, Nandod Taluka in Bharuch District of Gujarat is a tribal aged twentyfive. He was sent to Rajpipla Sub-jail on December 28th, 1984 to remain there till 24th of January 1985 or till he paid to his wife and child Rs 500 by way of maintenance for the previous five months at the rate of Rs. 100/- per month. On my visit to him he told me: "I was terrified of jail life. I had made so many trips to the court and paid all I could and more to avoid imprisonment. But inside here it is not so bad after all. No one beats me. The food here is better than what I am used to. Here they give us vegetables with *rotlos* (coarse chappatis) whereas at home we had to do with *rotlos* and onions or just dried chillies and salt."

"Six prisoners share a room in the jail. At night the room is locked from outside. But during the day the doors are open and we are allowed to move about within the jail precincts. The room is a little crowded but in winter it is not very troublesome. All of us sleep on the floor. Each one is given a spread to sleep upon and blankets sufficient to keep warm. I do not miss the *khatlo* (wooden country-made bed) I had at home. There is an electric light in each room. At home we did not have even a kerosine lamp. I help in the kitchen with the cooking and washing. I help watering the plants in the garden. I enjoy doing some work. I hate sitting idle all day long. For the rest, jail-life is all right."

Would Manilal take his wife and child back, if she showed readiness to live with him? His answer was, "I would like to take her home with my child. But she is

prevented from coming with me. Her father and another old man are not permitting her to come with me. I married her seven years ago. She bore me a child who died soon after its birth. Three years ago she bore me another child who is alive. But I am unable even to visit them because of her father and brother. After our marriage my wife used to go every now and then to her father's house. She would return home with me when I went to bring her home."

"Before my marriage, I studied up to the third standard and then began to work as casual labourer. I went to Sabarkantha District far away from home. The wages were Rs. 125/- for many many long hours of work in the field every day and night. Life was hard but we had no choice. In my native village and neighbourhood there was no work whatsoever. After my marriage I went to work outside leaving my wife at home. Some time later, I took her along with me. We worked for about two years in Sabarkantha."

"I brought her back home for delivery. But her father came and took her away. I went to meet her but friends told me that my father-in-law had planned to beat me up. Later after the birth of my child, I went with my brother to take my wife and child home, but her father shut me up in a room and was preparing to beat me. Luckily, my brother rescued me. Later at the instance of her father she filed a maintenance suit alleging all kinds of falsehood against me. Yet I do not keep any grudge against her. She is ready to live with me but only if her people let her. It is unlikely. They are not asking for a divorce either. They do not want to pay the customary fine to me. As I am the wronged partner, I am entitled to claim a fine.

Manilal was asked: Is life a sad sequence of events for you?" His response was: "I do not have much. But I am content with the little. As long as I have good health I don't mind going to work far away also. My parents are alive. They are not able to work. I cultivate three acres

of land. I have three brothers who have to be given their share of the produce. They are poor and stay separately. I have a sister who is married. She lives with her husband. On days we go for work, our basic needs are met. Though we do not have much wealth to exchange, we share what little we have among our relatives and members of our tribe. People visit needy persons and comfort them."

I questioned Manilal further: "What are the things you enjoy very much?" Manilal said: "I have my family, my people and friends. They are concerned about me and I am concerned about them. We have gatherings of our family, village group, and bigger groups on different occasions. Births, deaths, marriages, meals (fairs), dances, *bhajans* and seasonal festivals are occasions when we gather according to our customs and make merry or mourn.

"On the occasion of Holi festival our people dance every night for about ten nights. Some young men sleep outside their huts for about a week to become *gherios* (ritual dancers) at the festival. On the night of Holi they tie bells round their waists and dance round the fire all night. During the subsequent days they go round the homes of every person in their villages and neighbourhood and live on the hospitality of the people they visit. From every home they receive some food or cash. They have elaborate and ceremonial dances when they visit homes in which people mourn for their recently departed dear ones. We have a day set apart on which all the villagers assemble in one place at night time. Some rituals commemorating the ancestors are performed on the occasion. All the people dine together and the young women and men dance. Every now and then somebody organises a *bhajan* in his home inviting all the people to participate. People assemble and sing all night and drink tea. Almost every month there is a *mela* in one place or another. Many of these are at night. Young people of both sexes love to sing and dance when they have something to eat. On such festivals tribal boys and girls marry merely by mutual consent to live together. Many marriages are also broken

up on these occasions and both parties start afresh with new partners. A person may have to marry two or three times in his or her life as marriages break up frequently. Marriage partners may reunite even after cohabiting with some others for a short time."

Manilal was asked: "Do you enjoy going out to work in distant districts?" His reply was: "We have to go out for a part of the year as there is nothing to eat in the village. We enjoy travelling to distant places and having something to eat and time to rest. But everyone is anxious to return to the village. Many people borrow money from their employers to go and live in the village for a few months promising to return work."

I asked Manilal: "What type of future do you expect? Do you hope for a better tomorrow? Do you think things will improve for you and your people in course of time?" Manilal's answer was: "I am well today. Tomorrow or suddenly I may fall ill. The dry bread too tastes sweet when we are hungry. We sing while going to and returning from work. A few of our tribe have some regular jobs. They have improved their condition, not the others. Long ago our fore-fathers lived in the forests. Now forests are not there. So we adjust to the situation and migrate for labour. We really do not know what will happen next. In the jungle too food was available only if we exerted ourselves. Food is available now too if we have work. There is only a little change."

2. Cheated by Government and all

Suka Navi Vasahat is a resettlement colony in Nadod taluk of Bharuch District. There are about 165 houses in it, which were transported from Panchmuli their original village some 15km. away in the same taluk. The government acquired their lands in Panchmuli for the construction of Sardar Sarovar on the Narmada river. On my visit to Suka the rehabilitated people told me: "We are almost completely illiterate. Some of us have completed two years or less of primary school education. Rarely has any one completed five years of schooling. When our

village had to be shifted, the government appointed a Rehabilitation officer. All that he has done is to take us to many distant places far away from the main body of our tribal community. Some of the places he showed us were not fit for cultivation. They were excellent sites for stone quarries."

"Not far from our neighbourhood, there are many acres of land belonging to *benami* (fictitious) landholders. But these lands were mortgaged to some banks as loans had been taken on the security of those lands. We were assured by the landowners that the loan amount and interest would be paid to the bank from the price of the lands and the same would be handed over to us without any encumbrance on them. In fact we obtained the land records before the registration of sale of lands. At that time the records showed that the lands were without any encumbrance whatsoever. We gave the records to the resettlement officer to obtain the cheque for paying the agreed price. Two years after purchasing the lands we needed to take some loans. At that time we came to know that our lands were still encumbered. The burden on the land is more than double the price of the land."

"Many of us have lost most of our lands in Panchmuli but not all of them. We have purchased five acres in Suka for each family. The government has not paid us any money for those lands which have not been acquired by it. Some three hundred acres of land in Panchmuli belonging to a hundred families are of this nature. From Suka it is not possible to go to Panchmuli to cultivate lands."

"In Panchmuli we never bothered about land records. If we could cultivate more land than what we had we ploughed government waste land or forest land. Some officers fined us for cultivating forest land. But they seldom gave us any receipts. Similarly we paid land revenue for cultivating waste land. But the record keeper would not give us any receipts. If we had such receipts, we would have become the owners of the lands by now and could have obtained compensation."

"In our old village we had no problem in building our houses. Anyone who wanted to build a house could build one by going into the forest and cutting down the wood and bamboos. We did it from the time of our fore-fathers. Here in Suka there is no forest in the neighbourhood. We had no difficulty in our original village to find fire wood. In fact no one had any use for blankets even in severe winter. We kept a fire alive all night to keep our houses warm and to keep the place lit. Our cattle used to graze in the forest. In Suka we have no firewood and no pasture land."

"Devan Bhala of our village was shown a piece of land which was fertile and was told that he could purchase it. He liked the land and was given possession of it in view of the imminent purchase. In the sale deed the owner wrote the Survey Number of another plot on a slope where erosion had washed away all the top soil and where only grass grows. Devan did not know of this mischief till a year after the event, when he went to ask for a copy of his land record. The land in his name was shown not to have been cultivated. The one in his possession was shown to have been personally cultivated by the original land lord. Devan is now asked by the authorities not to trespass into the fertile land."

"Some of our children have reached matriculation. The government is bound to give preference in jobs to our children in the Narmada project. But no one from our village has been given even the job of a peon or a watchman. Jobs are a plenty for those who can bribe the officers."

"We are still one with our people. We are on familiar grounds. Our folk dances, bhajans and observances go on as before. They brighten our lives."

3. A fighter hunted

Chandu Virom Vasava is a tribal from Luna, a village in Valia Taluka of Bharuch District. He had to flee his village even though he had been elected president of the village panchayat, and even though tribals formed the

majority of the population in the village. On my visit to him he explained his struggle to obtain justice for his people: "Even though my people are in the majority the president of the panchayat was not from our community. The outsiders who came to our village and misappropriated our lands keep Sindhis as watchmen. They travel on horseback armed to the teeth. They beat, kick and abuse us, particularly the landless labourers. One sympathetic Brahmin teacher inspired me to organise our people which I did. In one panchayat election I contested and defeated a big landlord. I am a landless labourer and I suggested to our people to demand the minimum wages fixed by law. As a result I was not called for any work in the village. But I took our people to neighbouring villages for work. One day as I was returning home from work with the wages of the members of my group, the Sindhis fell upon me and beat me up and took away the wages meant for the entire group. I filed a case against them. They filed a cross complaint against me implicating me in theft. I was kept in a lock up. The Deputy Superintendent of Police came there and forced me on the point of a gun to withdraw my complaint.

"Some Landlords ~~has~~ encroached the panchayat land. I issued notice to them. They were determined to get rid of me. So they sent their Sindhis again and again to beat me up. At last I had to leave the village. The police and administration side with our tormentors. Most of our people left the village as the harassment became unbearable. Some of them have left behind some land and huts. The landlords were just waiting for such an event. Now they can grab everything."

"One day while I was in hiding some landlords came on two motor cycles with the Sindhis. They had got scent of me. I was absent when they came, but a relative of mine was seen by them. They beat him up. When I came to know of it I had to go to another village to remain in hiding. Once my old mother fell ill in my native village. I could not visit her for fear of the landlords. She

has recovered but she won't hear of leaving the old house and village. She comes to see me occasionally."

"I do not despair of success in our struggles. We could not succeed till today. But we will return when conditions improve. Some of our leaders have been killed by the landlords with the help of the police. The government is on their side."

4. New creation

The three situations described above are typical of tribal life in Bharuch District. Even jail and malicious prosecution do not inject venom into an average tribal's life. Many tribals face disruptions in their family and marriage. Modern courts do violence to tribal way of life. Yet, they will not be crushed. They refuse to despair. They manifest a non-dependence on multiplicity of goods for their happiness. The satisfaction of the barest necessities of life is sufficient for them to find joy in life. Tribal norms allow a great deal of flexibility and adaptability. They derive their happiness from the fellowship of their brethren than from the possession and consumption of goods.

The rehabilitated tribals have been duped, but they do not fume with anger. Chandu Virom put up a fight, but when the allies of their enemies showed their teeth, Chandu and his people chose to wait for a more opportune moment to continue their struggle.

What would Jesus do in such a situation? What would he say? Are they closer to him than many baptised? Is the fellowship that sustains them different from Christian fellowship? Would Jesus give priority to enrolling them in the ranks of his disciples? What could be more important than making people church members? Is a Christian one who learns from such people, who strives to remove the conditions that promote the exploitation of such people, who organises all those who are of good will, all those who are burdened and are suffering, all who struggle for a new creation in which people do not have to be brutal to one another but be brethren to one another?

Mathew Kalathil

4. Despair and Hope:

Bagi Tola

New Year's eve, 1985. I am invited to one of our older catholic centres for mid-night Mass. But there is another village of harijans where there are some difficulties, and where I haven't been for some time. So I decide to go there. Bagi Tola, 32 families living in half an acre of land, just mud-houses built almost one on top of the other. This time it has a bombed-out appearance, for ten houses have collapsed during the last monsoon; and now with straw scattered all around for protection against the winter cold, with the children and animals mixed in everywhere, it has the appearance of one huge stable.

The Bhuiyas of Bagi Tola seem like a drowning people who have'nt even the strength to grasp the rope that is thrown to them. There are the collapsed houses, there is the closed down adult education centre, there have been two recent beatings by the high-caste Bhumi-hars, there is the heavy drinking by almost all the men, there are the children who started going to school but who ran away, there is the gross underpayment of daily wages, there is the high mortality rate of the children, there is the recent embezzlement of bank loans for the harijans and so on and on. And all this is in stark contrast to the brick houses, the vast fields, the bus line, the good jobs, the college education of the high caste whose houses are less than 100 yards away, and who stare sullenly and arrogantly as I walk past them to the harijan Tola. If stares were effective, I'd be turned to ice.

Our efforts in Bagi tola are not going well, and my friend who visits the village every week says that very few attend the meetings when he goes, and the small

community that we are trying to build seems to be falling apart. "You don't understand", he tells me. "They just don't want to change from the way they are. They feel secure the way they are, and don't want to be disturbed."

So, as we enter the village this New Year's eve, I am nervous about the reception we will get from the harijans. But my fears are allayed, it is an exceptionally warm reception. Those whom we meet are delighted that we have come. They pull out a mat and we sit down, we even get a cup of warm tea that they go to the trouble to provide. In twos and threes the people come in and chat, but my hopes for a meeting are continually frustrated, because just as quickly as they come they drift off again. There are so many things to talk about, but you can't really have a meeting if there is nobody there. It is now dark, and eventually I ask one of them to go off and call them all, which he does. But he comes back shortly and says that they won't come. During the afternoon it clouded over and a biting wind started, and they are all off huddling in homes against the cold and won't come now. Let's meet in the morning. I understand, but am disappointed.

Then we are called to a house for a meal, simple but warm, and after that the women, squatting around the glowing *chula*, talk with unusual directness, talk about their children and of the marriage of their daughters and the Tulsi Vir feast, but all the things I want to talk about seem beyond them.

Then I notice a few of the men in anxious conversation, and my friend comes and tells me there is no room to stay for the night. These are all one room houses, with families, and it seems there is no extra place. So we will have to go back to Babupara, our base village a little less than a mile away. Again I feel disappointment and annoyance, not at the thought of the walk back in the dark and the wind, but because what I had hoped for hadn't come off. But just at the last moment they find a place where a family is away, and so we go there. Straw is laid out, and we bed down for the night, the two of us and

about six young men from the village. As we blow out the *dibri* to go to sleep, one of them, child like, says to me, "Tell us a story". So I tell them a simple story, about the eagle's chick who was raised by a household hen, and never realised its own potential to fly and soar in the heights. It is an apt story for them, I think. Then, when I finish, the same young man says, "Now I will tell you a story". So he begins to sing, in a simple melodic chant of rhythmic lines and haunting tune, some mythological story in his own dialect. He goes on for about an hour, and we drift off to sleep, and the New Year of 1985 creeps in over us.

In the morning we awake to the sound of falling rain, not the heavy monsoon showers, but the light patter of winter rain. From under the warmth of my blanket I hear one of them repeat the name of God a few times, and another one comment, *Bhagwan pani diya*, God has given us rain. I wonder about their enthusiasm — it will be good for the potato crop of the landlords, but for these ones, only more cold and misery in the already slimy mud of their *tola*.

I huddle over the warm embers of a fire for an hour or so, but the young men are up to face the new day. Their spirits I find extraordinarily high, moving about with briskness and enthusiasm — for what I wonder. New Year? It is a concept they hardly know of. I still have disappointment, because what I have come for is still not done, and we hadn't got down to discuss some of the issues which I think are so important. But somehow that disappointment fades and I begin to pick up, quite irrationally, it seems, some of that joy and enthusiasm, almost merriment, of the young men. I wonder what it is, that intangible something there that they seem to have. Is it hope? It is certainly not hope of a better life, because they themselves know that is something they will never live to experience. After all, tomorrow will only bring more collapsed houses and beatings. And it is certainly not hope in a coming Kingdom, nor in some evolutionary or revolutionary process, nor in some existence beyond

this existence. These are all things of the future, and these Bhuiyas know that there is one thing they don't have — a future.

It seems to me a hope in today itself, a commitment to life itself, to the fullness of the present. Life is so fragile for them, it attains an extra value. There in the midst of their failure and defeat, and their utter inability to resort to human power, through the darkness of human hopelessness there seems to be a golden thread, a transcendent Presence, a Reality in the midst of these harsh realities of Bagi Tola. Is it hope, or is it illusion? Whence the warmth, the love, the care, the joy? Maybe, where there is no human hope, this closeness to Reality is the greatest hope.

Another warm up of tea arrives, a luxury that they themselves never have in the morning. And so we leave; they accompany us to the edge of the village, and we set off across the bare but moist paddy fields. As we go, I wonder to myself who is the one being conscientised, they or I.

Tony Herbert

5. Despair and Hope:

The Oraons

Hope, whether natural or supernatural, is often the only explanation for human struggles and yet it is a subject least engaging because of the difficulty in treating it satisfactorily. It is difficult to know with certainty what keeps one going, and when it is a question of a whole group or community the problem gets all the more complicated and involved. To talk about the hope of the Oraons is a task we take up with obvious hesitation and trepidation for this is our first ever attempt at some systematization.

The Oraons

The Oraons are a tribe in Chotanagpur. Chotanagpur is a Sub-division of Bihar in the central belt of India. Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa have the highest concentration of Oraon population. A large number of Oraons are found in Assam and West Bengal as Tea Garden labourers; they are also found scattered in Bangla Desh, Nepal, the Andamans and Mauritius.

They are a sacred society, settled agriculturists, technologically simple, and egalitarian in their outlook. Perhaps the way we can best come to see and know Oraon hope is to know the Oraon and his mind.

The Oraon has an affable personality; he presents a pleasant profile. Notes Archer, "To the earliest observers a capacity for cheerful hard work was the most notable characteristic of Oraons; and a sturdy gait, an exultation in bodily physique and a sense of fun are still their most obvious qualities. These are linked to a fundamental simplicity — a tendency to see an emotion as an action, and not to complicate it by postponement and cogitation. An

Uraon hardly ever thinks about himself, and for this reason a state of anger is only with difficulty distinguished from an act of assault. In a similar way Uraons dislike doing nothing, and this perhaps explains both the frequency of their dancing and round of visiting which occurs in the slack season of the year. Equally an Uraon dislikes being alone and he relishes a happy domestic life with a jolly wife, three or four children and a dog. Markets, marriages and liquor shops are also very popular because they bring Uraons together. The final picture is of a kindly simplicity and a smiling energy." (*The Blue Grove*, 1940, p.19)¹

Oraon hope

Oraon outlook on life is simple. Crops, cattle and children are their prized possessions; for with the help of these they are assured of the happiness and continuation of their family, clan and tribe. They live in a largely symbiotic union with nature. They are emotionally linked to their land and cherish healthy cattle and children. They look forward to a happy prosperous life free from physical evils and bodily sufferings.

The conditions and context in which the Oraons have to realise their dreams and meet their aspirations and expectations are supplied by the universe as perceived by them. Oraon cosmology consists of a High Benevolent Dharmes, God. There are again innumerable spirits presiding over each and every element of creation: hills and forests, plains and valleys, gorges, trees and plants, rivers and waterfalls, rocks etc. They are the guardian spirits of nature to which man must offer periodic sacrifices in satisfaction and appeasement. Life would be happy and peaceful under the all-pervading power and authority of provident Dharmes but for the mischief and evil machinations of the spirits. The Oraons, therefore, worship Dharmes and propitiate spirits while trying to

1. Archer, W. G., *The Blue Grove*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940

solve the problem of evil and suffering (cfr. *Oraon Symbols*, 1983, pp. 18-20)².

Oraon hope is simple, their aspirations and expectations uncomplicated, and their philosophy of life practical. The basis of their philosophy is the myth (the accumulated wisdom of the tribe) and the tradition of their fathers. The myth is exemplary and normative. Man must observe the order and maintain the natural harmony set by the creator, and in confidence earn his peace and happiness. Thus goes an Oraon prayer: "God, Dharmes above, the Panches here below...You Dharmes are our Father. Take care of whatever (whichever spirits) we have overlooked. Our eyes do not see. Your eyes see. You alone are Father, do Thou take care (restrain them)" (*Oraon Symbols*, 1983, p.23)³. Oraon expectation is that, with order and harmony in creation maintained and the divine injunction to worship the Creator and to propitiate the spirits fulfilled, peace and happiness would naturally follow.

Present situation

The present condition of the Oraons is far from happy. Their world is upset. They no longer are masters of their own country. Their lands have got fragmented and are being encroached upon by the government. They cannot claim the forest as their own and freely collect jungle produce without being taxed.

Modern civilization has made deep inroads into tribal life. Today's tribals are part of the Indian Republic; they are citizens of a democracy beyond the bounds of the tribe. Traditional government has been rendered largely dysfunctional, traditional leadership increasingly ineffectual.

2. Hedlund, R. E. and Beulah Herbert, eds., *Culture and Evangelization*. Church Growth Research Centre, Madras, 1984

3. Roy, Sarat Chandra, *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*. Reprint, Catholic Press, Ranchi, 1984.

Modernisation dealt a stunning blow to the Oraon communities of Chotanagpur. The community is placed face to face with the onslaught of steady influx of caste hindus. Displaced from their traditional homes and land to make room for industrial complexes the tribals are compelled to move out and see the disintegration of their communities. Cinema culture has invaded even the remote interiors with consequent erosion of the traditional values and customs. With education have come changes in the value system. Social mobility obtains easy for the educated, and most of the educated are moving to towns and cities in search of employment. Change in value system and increased social mobility have greatly disturbed the harmony of family and village life.

The hope of the people for peace, harmony and prosperity stands frustrated and shattered to a considerable extent. Egalitarian aspiration for communal prosperity and corporate goal has given way to individualism and competition. While a large majority of Oraons have sought solution to their problems in Christianization, others have taken to sanskritization and got hinduized to different degrees. The community is divided on religious ground though held together on socio-cultural basis which is, however, thinning fast with time. The picture is of a community in confusion and disarray.

Obstacles

The strain of changes lies heavy on the Oraons. Not that the community is faced with difficulties and problems for the first time. Ever since the 15th century political and cultural invasions had to be contended with (Roy, S. C., *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*. Reprint, Catholic Press, Ranchi, 1984, pp.28-34)⁴. But present day changes have been simply overwhelming and traumatic.

The obstacles on the way to realising Oraon dreams are manifold: political, economic, socio-cultural and religious. Modern democracy and market economy are alien to

4. Roy, Sarat Chandra, *The Oraon Religion and Customs*. Editions Indian, Calcutta, 1972.

their systems and the Oraons have not yet been able to fully take to them. They do not understand the mechanism of party politics and find capital-based profit-oriented economy beyond their grasp.

In the socio-cultural scene the Oraons have different forces to cope with. In the first place there is the fact that religion has divided the community, and the Oraons have to accept that the division has come to stay. Conversion to Christianity that began in the middle of the last century has made deep impact on the culture, outlook and life style of the people. Thus caught up in the process of social and cultural change the community is witnessing only more rapid changes today. Politico-religious activities of the RSS begun in the early fifties (the Kalyan Ashram at Jashpurnagar, M.P. was started by Ramakant Keshav Deshpande, a lawyer from Maharashtra in 1952) are being increasingly felt especially since the last few years. Anti-Christian campaigns, "Shudhikaran" movements and blatant attempt at hinduizing and misleading the simple uneducated tribals by the RSS enthusiasts are only on the increase. Such activities conducted on the pretext of "Banwasi Kalyan" have but perplexed the gullible.

In so far as politics is a social policy inclusion in Indian Democracy has meant further social and cultural disintegration for the Oraons. Politics is dominated by the caste hindus who manipulate and exploit tribal helplessness. Industrialization and other government development programmes that displace the tribals in the name of national development only ensure non-tribal infiltration and work to give more sure footing for the-outsiders, the caste hindus.

The Oraons, and for that matter, all the tribals of Chotanagpur, are a people who no longer are masters of their own life and destiny. They cannot plan for and organize their future at leisure and according to their own genius.

Responses, action plans

The picture about the condition of the Oraons painted above is surely not encouraging in the least. It may

lead one to surmise that the Oraons are the most to be pitied and ought to be saved from total disintegration. But the situation is, though difficult and painful, not hopeless and not to be despaired of. The tribe is known for resilience that has stood her well and helped her maintain her distinct identity against assimilation into the hindu mainstream for the last 400 years.

The Oraons have responded to crises in a characteristic fashion. Crises have been understood as and attributed to disruption of divine order in creation caused either by human stubbornness or neglect or by the mischief of the evil spirits. They have always sought religious explanation for pain, suffering and evil (*Oraon Symbols*, 1983, p. 19; also *Sevartham*, 1982, pp. 28-29)⁵.

They do everything in their power. They offer sacrifices to the spirits to appease and satisfy them, and take refuge in Dharmes, God. In the past they took to various Bhagat movements (Roy, S. C., *Oraon Religion and Customs*, Editions Indian, Calcutta, 1972, pp. 229 ff.)⁶ to reform the community religiously to win divine favour against enemy forces, the evil spirits and the intruders. With the coming of the British the Oraons came under the influence of Christian missionaries and were converted to Christianity. Whatever steps they took the Oraons acted religiously to better their economic and socio-religious conditions (cfr. Van Exem, in Hedlund, R. E., and Beulah Herbert, eds., *Culture and Evangelization*, Church Growth Research Centre, Madras, 1984, p. 58)⁷.

In the context of traumatic changes consequent upon the British Rule and Independence many tribes of the central and north-eastern India as they have closely inter-related social, economic, political and cultural elements have either gone through or are going through a painful process of finding their own bearings. The Oraons like

5. Tirkey, Boniface, S. J. *Oraon Symbols*. Published in M. P. (India) by the Society of Jesus, Catholic Press, Ranchi 1983.

6. *Sevartham*, vol. 7, St. Albert's College, Catholic Press, Ranchi, 1982

7. Statement of Ranchi Jesuits' Educational Aims and Objectives 1985

many other tribes of the region have chosen to embrace Christianity in response to the situation and maintain the identity. The need of the day is to allow and assist the Oraons to develop according to their own genius and take the pace characteristic to them. The realization of Oraon hope would imply, 'opportunity for cultural and economic development and growth of full-fledged citizenship, pride in their historical and cultural heritage, respect for the dignity and rights of their persons, fulfilment of their religious aspiration, and ability to protect themselves against the exterior forces which try to exploit their poverty and ignorance' (Statement of Ranchi Jesuits' Educational Aims and Objectives, 1985)⁸.

Christian history of the Oraons shows that only with Christianity have they been able to realize their dreams to some appreciable degree. They have gained freedom from the oppressive fear of the spirits, and have built up their self-confidence. Jesus has made them free! In Christianity they have found hope for better economic, socio-cultural and religious life. They are finding and forging a new identity, the identity of the liberated.

Oraon hope is religious; hope for blessings, 'better days' on good terms with God and creation. Christ living at the very core of their culture has made it true for Christian Oraons. Many a time a catechumen is heard to say, "Jesus dao ullan ed:ōs" (Jesus will bring us happier days). Surely, more of pioneering and well adapted Christian actions like that of Lievens' apostolate of agrarian struggle (*Vidyajyoti*, May-June, 1982, pp. 215-218) will go a long way in realizing Oraon hope. Pointedly the community needs to be built up. In today's context the Oraons are to be organized and helped to forge politically important identity to effectively meet their hope and work corporately for the dignity and rights of their persons.

Boniface Tirkey

8. *Vidya Jyoti*, May-June, *Vidya Jyoti*, Delhi, Catholic Press, Ranchi, 1982.

6. Despair and Hope: Myths of the Oppressed and their Liberative Potential

Introduction

Liberative movements in India are often accused of basing themselves unduly on S. American model of social analysis and action programmes. It is pointed out that mere socio-economic insights into the human situation of poverty seem inadequate. Such an approach can only partially touch the depth of the poor who are so religious-minded and can offer only superficial motivation for change. It is advocated that, using the tools of religio-cultural analysis, deeper areas of dehumanisation and dependence must be explored. It is argued that social movements with an appeal to religious sentiments seem to sustain longer and affect the people deeper. Some political parties and advertisement agencies, through symbolic appeals to the subconscious, seem to make better use of the religious motif.

Is there a danger of reducing the depth of human beings exclusively to economic realities? Are the earthly concerns of the poor so detached from the totality of life that the depth can be reached outside the materiality of human beings? How could a liberation movement be total unless it is capable of evoking and integrating itself into the religio-cultural frame of mind where the poor often find exclusively "religious solution" to all their problems — material poverty, sickness, onslaught of floods and droughts etc.? How do we help them to preserve what is genuine in a religious tradition and integrate it into the liberation process? What is Christianity's specific contribution towards building up a common ideology and

offering a common religious meaningfulness to human liberation? Here Christian theology enters into a dialogical relationship with the existing religions and different ideologies aiming at the freedom of the poor.

Some of the ways religion is mediated are myths and belief systems. These can be enslaving or liberating. Though organised religion, by and large, tends to be a stabilising agent in society and hence an obstacle to people's movement, yet religion as such need not be so. We do find countless people who have committed themselves to the liberative cause of the poor precisely because of their religious convictions.

In this paper we would like to examine one aspect of the Harijan religiosity: myths. Myths reveal the collective unconscious of any group. They point to the pre-reflected, unorganised areas of personal and collective existence. They also have a power to evoke certain responses from the believers. The responses could be either subjugating the people to slavery or helping them achieve freedom from the enslaving forces of society and the invisible world like the *bhoots* and evil powers. We would like to examine some myths of the Harijans found in N. India in order to discover the hope and the hopelessness symbolised in them. The first part of the paper will offer a description of certain myths of the Harijans. Then we try to discover some salient features common to them. The paper will be concluded with some reflections on possible Christian contribution to social change through these myths.

1. Harijan Myths: Hope and Hopelessness

In this section we describe some myths and beliefs of the Harijan groups, Mushahars, Ravidas and Paswans. It is in the context of N. India that we discuss their problems.

a. Dumrajni of Ravidas

In a village near Dumraon, about 20 km outside of Patna, there is a temple dedicated to Dumrajni Mata. According to popular belief, during the reign of Cheru Rajas, a Harijan bride (some upper castes contend that the

bride was a Brahmin) died while defending her dignity. The king made advances to her as she was being taken to her husband's home. The common belief is that she reduced to ashes the molesting king, her own husband and all those who accompanied the marriage party. The forest around the scene was also destroyed by the divine fire emanated from her. And finally she herself committed *sati*. In course of time four places of worship arose here: one contains her ashes; the other three are in honour of her husband, of the palanquin-bearers and of the music party. Many devotees, especially women, irrespective of caste flock to the shrine. Unmarried girls are consecrated to Dumrajni; offerings of sari to the Mataji and dhoti to Babasir, her husband, are made here. Special pilgrimages are conducted at certain times of the year. On the *purnima* day of *savan* month, is the biggest festival celebrated. It coincides with the popular festival of *rakhi bandhan*. The shrine is locally known as the "woman's temple" because of its popularity among women.

b. Phul Dak of Mushahars

Mushahars are considered to be an untouchable group in Bihar. Their mythical ancestor is Phul Dak. According to a Mushahar myth¹ he was an honest person. A daughter of a certain Rajput called Sri Singh went out to collect grain from the field. At the end of the work, she sought the help of Phul Dak to lift up the bundle of grain and place it on her head. As he was helping her, the *sindhur* on her forehead got rubbed off. Subsequently her irate father killed Phul Dak. Chamba, a woman of barber caste, who witnessed the scene also was murdered. Both corpses were thrown into a nearby well. Eventually both began to show signs of power from the well; and today they are considered deities by the Mushahars.

1 to 5. Jose Vadassery S. J. *Studies in Culture and Personality* (The Mushahars of Gobadda and Lakshimpur), University of Pune, 1981. pp. 11-15

c. Deena Bhadri of Mushahars

According to another myth of the Mushahars², Deena Bhadri is the ancestor of this Harijan group. He was originally considered to be a strong and sincere person. In a dual he defeated a Paswan. However, later on, the Paswan deceived Deena Bhadri and murdered him. In course of time, Deena Bhadri became one of the gods of the Mushahars.

d. Raho and Rheta of Paswans

The Paswans are another group of Harijans in Bihar. According to one of their myths³ Lord Vishnu was strolling in the garden. There was a carcass of a cow lying on the path. Lord Vishnu asked the mythical ancestors, Raho and Rheta, to remove it. They did it out of devotion to Vishnu. However the act of touching the carcass of a cow made them untouchables. It is said that a plantain tree grew up in the place where the carcass fell. In their anger the ancestors cursed Lord Vishnu saying that henceforth plantain leaf would be an essential item for performing *puja* (worship) to him.

e. Mushahar Glory and Decadence

The Mushahars have another myth⁴ which establishes their original superiority over other castes. One day a Brahmin lady was planting seedlings in the field. A Mushahar lady, on her way to a river for fishing, passed by the field. As the Mushaharin entered the river, the Brahmin lady stole the basket belonging to the Mushahar woman and went off to a distant place where there was gold in abundance. The myth concludes saying that the Mushaharin spent her life catching fish while the cunning Brahmin lady looted all the gold. From this time on the Mushahars are considered inferior to the Brahmins.

2. Enslavement of the Human Spirit in Harijan Myths

In many of the myths we notice that in the primordial times the oppressed groups were enjoying freedom, innocence and equality with the rest of mankind. Contrary

to the popular belief current in contemporary society, the ancestors of the oppressed were generous and honest. Their downfall as well as their moral and socio-psychic decadence could be attributed to various factors such as being cheated by the upper castes (Deena Bhadri and the ancestral Mushahar lady) or committing a technical mistake (Phul Dak) or lack of shrewdness (Raho and Rheta). Religious justification seems to be offered for their present predicament. Harijans' self-understanding, especially their poor self-image, is legitimated on the social plane through such stories.

The gods as well as the ancestors are examples of weakness and cowardice. They are often depicted as susceptible to the craftiness of the oppressing class. The devotees grow into the qualities of the gods they worship; the worshippers tend to create social relationships modelled on the primordial society believed to be inspired by the gods. Since the ancestors themselves are helpless victims of exploitation by the upper castes or the cunning gods, the devotees, too, naturally come to accept themselves as weak and helpless. This collective awareness of inferiority or poor self-image is passed on to posterity through formal and informal education⁵. Thus the oppressed culture is kept up. In the myths examined above, the ancestral figures, good people in their original state, eventually fell from the pristine purity. It is an awareness of decadence that now dominates such cultural expressions as stories, sayings, proverbs, and models proposed to children for imitation.

The historical nucleus of the popular devotion to Dumrajni Mata, seems to have undergone considerable change in terms of her caste origin. The upper caste religious elite seem to have modified the original incident in their favour. No undisputable historical evidence can be adduced for Mata's caste. The popular acclaim, the unique place accorded to her in Harijan society in this area down the centuries seems to indicate that she was probably of Harijan origin. The upper caste seem to have co-opted her into their caste and placed her on the Brahminic pedes-

tal for worship. It looks almost incredible that the Brahmins would perform puja before a deity who was of Harijan origin or even tolerate a public devotion to a low caste who was the victim of their lust. Hence it is possible, in course of centuries, an upper caste origin was attributed to Dumrajni Mata⁶. This process becomes more easily understandable when we compare it with changes in social movements of the oppressed groups under the influence of dominant classes. Paulo Freire speaks about the domestication of the ideologies and movements of the oppressed through the oppressors. This will eventually lead to the weakening of the struggles of the poor. A similar phenomenon seems to have taken place in the religious sphere through the upgradation of Dumrajni to the Brahmin caste.

Certain elements like the mud figure, which contains the remains of her ashes, growing in size every year; her self-immolation as *sati*; reducing of the enemies and the forest to ashes through divine fire etc. could be attributed to the overzealous imagination of the devotees.

It must be observed that often enough the models presented in the myths of the oppressed do not lead to a commitment to change the present history. For example, lakhs of devotees have flocked to the shrine of Dumrajni. But the actual exploitative situation of women in Dumraon or in Bihar — rape, dowry killings, discrimination against women in socio-religious life, wife-beating etc. — does not seem to have altered significantly because of devotion to the Mataji. Offerings of thousands of saris to the deity does not seem to have made more and cheaper saris available in the market for the poor. Consecration of virgins to Dumrajni does not seem to have ensured a more dignified life for the women in married life or outside it.

Eventhough everything in the myths of the poor are not absolutely negative, it can be said that, in practice,

6. This is similar to the Brahminic origin attributed to the circumstances accompanying the birth of a Harijan, Saint Ravidas; He was born in a chamar family in XV Cent. in U. P. Kurien Kizhakekala & Jose Vadassery, *The Chamars; their Beliefs and Practices*, Patna, p. 5 ff.

myths seem to make the poor more passive and helpless than courageous to face the life of exploitation. It is true that some of them seem to offer a model for endurance in suffering which has a positive value inasmuch as this saves a person from total collapse. However, in the long run, this only leads to greater passivity in life and eventually to fatalism.

We have seen that many of the mythical heroes have been extolled as deities and are being worshipped by the poor. The contradiction between the hopes present in the belief system or the myths in their original form and the social practice of everyday injustice seems to be benumbed through such cultic ceremonies. Compensation for the social disharmony and for the harrowing experience of exploitation seems to be offered, perhaps not deliberately, through a promise of transhistorical fulfilment in the future. The cultic experience seems to help people to forget the nitty-gritty realities of the actual life. Even though this has some sort of a "soothing effect it does not lead to an effective historical commitment". It may offer the devotees some motive for endurance which is often needed to preserve the victims from absolute disintegration. However it seems unable to offer inspiration for initiating radical social changes. The distance between the future happiness promised in the myths or the belief systems and its negation in actual life seems to be expanding as the hope of a better future fades into oblivion and is finally replaced by fatalism.

3. Liberative Potential of Harijan Myths and Christian Contribution

Although the general tendency of Harijan myths seems to be one of making the poor hopeless in their dehumanised condition, we can find elements of hope in the midst of hopelessness. The archetypes in their original state were good powerful people who could inspire hope and courage in the poor. Even in the fallen state, we notice that the myths contain elements capable of inspiring hope for social transformation. For example, in the myths

we examined above, we can see a life-giving source, a fountain of hope, symbolically present in the plantain tree shooting forth from the grave of the cow (Paswan and Ravidas myth), or in the new life emerging from the ashes of Dumrajni Mata. In some other cases victims are accredited with superhuman power (Deena Bhadri, Phul Dak and the thakurin Chamba) and are being worshipped as deities.

It is easy to see the "resurrection pattern" in many of the myths. The archetypes of an oppressed class through their death as victims of violence become life-inspiring models for the people. Death at the hands of the oppressor is valorised religiously. Paradoxical though, we find that the exploiters themselves find meaning in the memory of those whom they tried to eliminate from the scene. Prophets are murdered and temples are built on their tombs for worship. In the context of a dialogical search in different religious traditions christianity could reveal to the Harijans the hidden potential for social change. This service is done not so much out of a triumphalistic experience of the superiority of Christianity as a participation in the common search for indigenous liberative resources of our people. Victims of violence like Dumrajni became protectress of virgins who search for good husbands. Could not Dumrajni be presented as a patroness of war on social evils and exploitation of women? One of Christianity's possible contributions would be to introduce into these myths an "earthly dimension" and a higher sense of commitment to history. A common search for truth and freedom as embodied in the survival and growth of the "humane" in the dehumanised people would lead to a discovery of new depths in different religions.

Traditional apologetics of Christianity emphasized the historical root of her beginnings and thus established her superiority over Hinduism. Such arguments do not seem to carry much weight with many believing Hindus because for them experience is the supreme norm for validating religious claims. Thus the apparently cogent 'proofs' of the Christian apologetics are passed over as irrelevant.

Whether Ram or Krishna was a historical figure is immaterial in religion because they are represented as symbols of collective experience of devotions, as far as such Hindus are concerned. In the context of our common search for the Beyond and a heology supportive of the freedom movement of the poor, models common to believers of different religions should be emphasized. Liberation from dehumanisation can be articulated and sustained through such common categories as "death-new life", "mythical and symbolic roots" etc. This may serve as a corrective to Christianity's exaggerated appeal to the historical.

Another way of helping the process of developing indigenous resources would be to bring into liberation movements the "resistence-dimension" of the archetypes and religious models as found in different religious traditions. Instead of emphasizing the passivity and surrender aspects of the ancestors we could explore more urgently the "residence-aspect" found in them. The ancestral heroes have laid down their lives in the struggle to resist oppression. Dumrajni is supposed to have resisted the upper caste king and became a martyr for women's dignity. Mushahar Phul Dak protested against the Rajput Sri Singh; Deena Bhadri gave up his life resisting a cunning Paswan; the Paswan Raho and Rheta showed courage to curse even Lord Vishnu against what they considered injustice. The Christian experience of Jesus resisting the evil forces of His time even unto death on the Cross has a resonance in many of the archetypes of the oppressed groups in India. Emphasis on the "resistence" element found in religious traditions can lead to a historical commitment to resist the contemporary oppressive forces. Exploring the liberative potential of such models present in the paradigms, sayings, folklores etc. of the culture of the poor is a way of contributing to liberation movement in India. This can lead to a commitment to stimulate action programmes to realize the hope contained in the myths. The hope of the oppressed is the hope of Jesus struggling to awaken Himself in the poor. It is the awakening from

lethargy of the images of God in the dehumanised sons and daughters of this country.

Conclusion

Myths, just like symbols, never exhaust themselves. Ever deeper reflections on them are possible. In this paper we have attempted to understand some of the liberative potential of a few Harijan myths. It is never exhaustive. Inter-religious search must go on exploring further into the depth of the myths and mysteries of the poor. This will reveal to us a new dimension of experience at the cross roads of the dehumanised masses and the religious apex of the human spirit.

Regional Theology Centre
St. Stephen's Church
Dinapore
Patna - 801 503
Bihar.

Joseph Velamkunnel

7. Hope shall not be Betrayed

Introduction

In the last few years of my life, from 1979 to 1984, but specially in the last months of this year 1984, many friends from many countries — Christians, people in sympathy with Christianity, cardinals, bishops, priests, fellow Jesuits, religious men and women and lay friends — have written to me and shown interest in me. The last months I have not answered their letters. I waited in grateful silence for the moment when I could speak the whole truth.

Several times the national and the international press have spoken about me. Their statements were sometimes true, sometimes not true. Now the time to speak out has come. I wish to give a simple, brotherly response to what has been said: A response that is no publicity stunt; publicity stunt would be meaningless in the present situation of Nicaragua. I want also to express frankly my view of what has happened and is happening. It is surely a personal view, a quite limited and partial view. But it is my view, and I think I must share it with those who are interested in me. Above all this is a letter full of gratitude. No name will be forgotten.

I know beforehand that some people, not you, will try to manipulate and misinterpret anything I say. I think I must say it nevertheless. In the following pages I shall try first to show what the state of the question is (nos. I and II), and then indicate briefly the stages through which the Lord has led me (nos. III to VI).

1. Ecclesiastical pressure and my conscientious objection

Soon after the victory of the Sandinist Revolution, the Nicaraguan bishops began to put pressure on us, priests in the Revolution. They wanted us to give up our

commitment to it. At that time Fr. Miguel D'Escoto was Minister for Foreign Affairs, my brother Ernesto Minister for Culture, Fr. Edgar Parrales Minister for Social Welfare and myself in charge of the Literacy Programme. After long months of tension, in June 1981, the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference finally gave us permission to continue in our work. This, we were told, was an exception made because of the state of emergency in which our country was living. On our part we had "voluntarily" to renounce the celebration of any Sacrament in public or in private. After that the bishops never granted us a meeting, although, we have been asking for it again and again.

Less than a year had passed after this agreement when the Bishops began again to put pressure on us demanding that we should definitively relinquish our work in the Revolution. This pressure was never applied personally, but always through the mass media. In the last two years the Vatican has also been involved in these pressure tactics, but again not directly or personally. After I accepted my appointment as Education Minister the pressure through the media has become intense. The pitch is such that I foresee that in the last weeks of this year 1984 I shall be presented with a final choice of either abandoning my commitment to the Nicaraguan Revolution or accepting expulsion from the Society of Jesus together with ecclesiastical sanctions of suspension and interdict.

I had nursed the hope that the Church would see in my work an apostolic service with a missionary character; a form of inculturated evangelical presence in a new historical process which has made an option in favour of the poor. For this reason I had thought I could entertain the hope of avoiding a conflict between a desire or command of the Church on the one hand and my conscience on the other.

In these last months I have devoted much time to discernment and intense prayer, and submitted myself to spiritual guidance, so that I might find the right solution and be secure in my decision. I have discussed the full

story of my life with men of deep spiritual experience, who are lovers of the Church and who know well the spirit of the Society of Jesus.

Because of this I can responsibly affirm that I have a *conscientious objection* to accepting the demands pressed on me by the ecclesiastical authorities. My objection is honest, objective and serious. Sincerely, I think before God that *I would commit a grave sin* if in the actual circumstances I were to abandon my priestly option for the poor, which has become real and concrete in Nicaragua through my work within the People's Revolution led by the Sandinists.

My conscience sees, as if in a *global intuition*, that my commitment to the cause of the poor of Nicaragua comes from God; that my desire not to abandon my work is also from God; and that for me to be faithful to the Gospel and to fulfil God's plan for my life means today to continue in my present responsibilities. I cannot think of a God who could ask me to abandon my commitment to the poor.

Passing on to an analytical reflexion, I easily find many reasons that strengthen the intuition of my conscience. Some of them may be briefly indicated:

a) The Nicaraguan revolutionary process, in spite of its mistakes which are the lot of any human effort and which I as an insider see very clearly, places the interests of the poor above everything else. It is, therefore, a legitimate translation in political terms of the preferential option for the poor which the Latin American Church has made.

b) I realize that this process, inspite of its shortcomings, attempts to create an original model of Revolution. One of its most important characteristics is respect for the Christian Religion which the majority of Nicaraguans profess. Another is the active participation of religious leaders in the building of the new society.

c) I experience that, in the midst of a trend towards unbelief, my priestly, religious and Christian presence among the revolutionaries is an important witness to the value and place of Faith in this process. I see this activity of mine within the frame of reference of Decree 4 of the 32nd General Congregation of the Jesuits and of the special mission given by His Holiness Pope Paul VI to the Society to fight against atheism.

d) Since the end of my Third Probation in 1970 I promised to live my priesthood at the service of the poor, leaving it to the inspiration of the Spirit to show me the concrete way of fulfilling this promise. I think that since then I have, with God's grace, kept the promise. I did it always in consultation with my religious community in a broad sense, and with my superiors in the Society of Jesus. This promise is today operative in a radical manner in Nicaragua in my work within the Revolution.

e) From then on, I have as a priest encouraged very many young people and many adults from the well-to-do and from the poorer classes to give themselves to the cause of the poor in a spirit of Faith and in the most effective way possible. In Nicaragua this cause is carried forward by the Sandinist Party. A good many people listened to my words and joined the masses and entered our history like ferment in the dough. Thousands of them were murdered; among them my brother-in-law and three nephews. Blood thus shed creates bonds that bind me closely to this cause, and to these people.

f) I am convinced that our presence in the Nicaraguan Revolution has at this moment a surpassing significance not only for this process but also for all the processes of social transformation which will take place in Latin America. Only a blind man can miss this. We are not in favour of models, but the experiences we share create new light and above all inspire others.

g) I have the impression that our revolutionary process is so new and original that it is difficult to understand it from the outside. I sincerely feel that people do not quite

understand the tremendous challenge we have in front of us, without our creating it, and without our having special personal merits to meet it. This challenge places a great responsibility on our shoulders, and any final decision on our part has in these moments many repercussions. The hundreds of letters we have received from all over the world are one of the clear proofs of what I am saying.

h) Our little Nicaragua is almost totally defenceless in face of the avalanche of calumnies and every sort of manipulation of news. The sole purpose of all this is to delegitimise its existence, denigrate its character, and thus more easily justify a military aggression against it. The cause of the people and its truth call for an effort to counter such filth and insult. We can do something for this. For this reason we shall continue to stand firm by the people in their Revolution, and with the whole strength of our priestly credibility and with the moral authority we have among our friends, we shall cry out to all who would listen: Do not believe the calumnies they spread against Nicaragua. We surely commit mistakes like everybody else, but not those alleged by our accusers. Our goals are just, noble, beautiful and holy". Today more than ever before Nicaragua needs qualified witnesses of the truth and the justice of its cause. Here, then, is our place.

i) To abandon the Revolution at this precise moment would be seen as a *desertion* of our commitment to the poor. It is my firm conviction that my withdrawal now would be not only a betrayal of the cause of the poor but also an act of *treachery towards my Country*. Any reasonable analysis of the international situation will show that at this moment we are a nation attacked by counter-revolutionaries officially and publicly supported by the present North American Government; but at any moment we may fall victim to aggression by the military power of the US Government. That is why the present North American administration refuses to recognize the People's Sandinist Revolution.

j) I am being ordered to abandon the Revolution at a juncture when the whole country is in a state of "general alert" and the Sandinist Army is kept in battle readiness expecting any moment a military aggression. The mission entrusted to me at this time when foreign intervention is likely is indeed very dangerous. I know very well that my life is in greater danger now than at the time when we fought the Somoza dictatorship. But I cannot abandon my people. I shall never abandon them. I love their cause more than my life. And I am asked to abandon the cause precisely when the people are in the greatest danger, and are calumniated and attacked by the most powerful country on earth.

k) The order I have received obliges me to take decisions based on my conscience. I perceive that the pressures which are at the origin of that order do not emerge from any theological reflection, nor from any Gospel inspiration, nor any pastoral needs. In communion with the Church I have the right to say that some of the bishops of Nicaragua have a political interest which has shown itself today as much as yesterday to be in clear conflict with the interests of the poor who form the great majority of Nicaraguans.

In the case of Nicaragua, even the Holy See is a prisoner of political conceptions which have arisen from traumas produced by Eastern European conflicts. Such conceptions have little to do with the history of God's people on our Latin American continent, and less with the Nicaraguan revolutionary process. Here we see that Vatican's political stand regarding Nicaragua exactly coincides with President Reagan's. Our withdrawal from our posts is ordered in order to deprive the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Process of its legitimacy. In Nicaragua there is absolutely no reason to speak of a basic religious conflict between the Church and the Revolution. No dogma of the Christian faith, no Christian teaching and no demands of Christian morality are called in question. What we have is a political confrontation. The bishops have publicly taken a position in favour of those who attack the Revolution

and those who want to crush the present regime in order to go back to our past. The rigid application of Canon 285, no. 3 cannot but appear in Nicaragua as a mere pretext to weaken the Revolution through our withdrawal. This is one more step in a long history of aggression of every kind which the US Government and its allies have committed against our little country. The demand made on us aims at helping Goliath in his effort to destroy David.

Moreover, in dealing with our case, the Bishops have shown little pastoral concern. Six times I asked the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference to grant me an audience so that I might dialogue with them. My letters were never answered. It is painful to feel oneself totally rejected by one's Pastors.

On July 8th of this year, before my appointment as Education Minister was made public, I wrote to the President of the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference (with a copy to each individual bishop), asking them to give me an opportunity to dialogue with them. I ended my letter with these words: "I want to assure you already now of my readiness to discuss with you or with the whole Episcopal Conference any concern, problem or point of view that is dear to your heart in the field of education". This letter received the same treatment as all previous letters: it went unanswered.

These several reasons are among the factors that have led me — for the first time in my 32 years of Jesuit life — to problems with obedience. In the particular case under consideration, I have a serious conscientious objection to obey. This is not a passing sentiment. Already two years ago, in an interview which was later printed in the book *Ministros de Dios, Ministros del Pueblo* (Ministers of God, Ministers of the People), I told Fr. Teófilo Cabestrero: "I have a profound sense of being called to be obedient to God in religious life. Never in my life have I made greater sacrifices for the sake of obeying God than in the Revolution. And never in my 30 years of religious life have I understood more vividly the importance of the

obedience of Faith which is obedience to the will of God. But this obedience to God passes through the act of listening to the voices and the cry of our poor and suffering people. I seek to obey God above all things and I feel that nobody and nothing can separate me from the path of obedience. And since we have had by now a long practice of risking our lives many times, I can say without exaggeration and without vanity that I am not afraid of even death. I have no fear and I am ready for anything which, in my life of obedience to my conscience, is demanded in order to obey God, and to be unconditionally, always, and at every moment, faithful to my people, to this people that is still suffering and living in misery in a country which cannot in three years perform the miracle of passing from misery to development, a country that has so many needs as result of the destruction, plunder, blockage and aggression it has suffered for long.

"I want this to be clear: because of my faith in the Lord and the obedience of faith to the Lord to which I am consecrated in my religious and priestly life, and after much reflection on all the circumstances of my life, I feel obliged in conscience to this irreducible, irrevocable and irreversible commitment to my poor people. I am clear that this is what God asks of me, this is what God wills. And I am ready to accept death to fulfil this task. Nothing and nobody can deflect me from this. Anything which goes against my commitment to the people would, for me, be clearly against the will of God and therefore sinful.

"I have very clear personal experiences in which I have seen that I would be betraying God and going against his will if, in the name of I don't know what law, I were to abandon my people, the poor, the students that go on a hunger strike for their companions suffering in the hands of the police. I have felt this several times. And now I feel it at greater depth, because that was only the beginning."

Today, two years after giving this personal testimony, I can affirm the same thing with greater conviction.

2. The Ultimatum and the Sanctions of Ecclesiastical Authorities

- a) I believe that Can 285 is right. I have nothing against it. I also think that today more than ever the exception granted to the priests in Nicaragua should be renewed, because today more than ever the Church must give a clear testimony that it is on the side of the poor, now that their hopes are being threatened and even destroyed.
- b) I keep my conscientious objection. My religious community is a witness that my objection is sincere and its motivation evangelical. I think it would be a sin to abandon the people specially when it is under such attack—military, economic, political and even media attack. I feel that God cannot be asking me to be on the side of those who want to devour my people like bread.
- c) Never shall I ask to leave the Society of Jesus. I consider any possible expulsion from it (which I think may happen under pressure) and any sanctions which the Bishops may want to impose on me unjust and wrong. I recognise authority in the Church but I also know that it is neither arbitrary nor unlimited. For this reason I protest against what I consider to be an abuse of authority.
- d) I shall continue to live as a religious and by God's grace I intend to remain celibate. My priesthood nobody can remove from me. With God's help and in communion with the Church, I hope to continue to be a spiritual leader in the community of my people, that is to say, its servant, even giving my life for the growth of such conditions as may lead to the people's total liberation.
- e) I am deeply conscious of my sinfulness. I do not want anybody to have an idealised picture of me; that would be a great error. But what is interesting in this case is that I am not being punished for my sins, but for what I feel is a call from God. And to God's call I cannot deny a positive response.
- f) I am very grateful for the support, advice and deep friendship that I have received from my Jesuit Community in Bosques de Altamira, especially from its Superior Peter

Marchetti. All these years they have been my best friends and brothers. I am grateful to the Delegate of Fr. Provincial for Nicaragua, Fr. Inaki Zubizarreta who has always shown great interest in my case. He is a great friend and a man according to the heart of God. The Provincial of the Central American Province, Fr. Valentin Menéndez, has accompanied me all along with sincere sympathy, understanding and support. I also want to thank Rev. Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, for his respect for my conscientious objection, for his personal appreciation and for the interest he has shown in finding a positive solution to my case.

g) The one who refused absolutely to grant an exception to the priests of Nicaragua that they might continue to work for the Revolutionary Government is Pope John Paul II. I am sorry to have to say this, but in Christian truth I cannot keep silent.

When in 1982 the then Papal Delegate for the Society of Jesus, Paolo Dezza S.J., sent me word that I had to abandon my work in the Sandinist Youth Movement, I asked him to give me in writing the reasons for which he wanted me to give up this work, so that I might reflect over them. Fr. Dezza answered me on the 12th of January 1983. There were no reasons. It was an order from the Pope. I copy here literally the principal sections of this letter:

"I appreciate very much the work you have been able to do for your Nicaraguan brothers in many and diverse forms, specially in the National Literacy Campaign. I appreciate that you have always endeavoured to offer a clear testimony of your priestly and Jesuit identity, and that you have rejected posts which seemed incompatible with your religious vocation even when they did imply a service of some sort to your country. "On behalf of the Society I want to express to you my deepest recognition and gratitude, and at the same time to place before you the present situation with complete clarity.

"As you know I have communicated to Fr. Provincial the Holy Father's oft repeated wish that all priests,

not only the Jesuits, should withdraw from that type of collaboration with the Government which makes them committed as part of official organisms. The position you now hold, although strictly not a Government post, is very closely tied to the Government as you are in a political organisation of the Sandinist Front. And although it is possible to do authentic apostolic work in the post which you are now holding, still the Holy Father has many times expressed his will that such offices be not exercised by priests, and he hopes that we, Jesuits, will give a lead in this obedience. It is necessary therefore that we should fulfil the will of the Holy Father with alacrity and in a spirit of Faith.

"As you see, dear Fr. Cardenal, we are in a delicate and difficult position. But I believe that God will give us His light and His grace to enable us to respond to him, placing all our trust in the Lord who showed us by his example an obedience which seemed folly to men, but which was in fact redemptive love for all peoples of all times."

Whoever may have read these pages of mine so far will probably see clearly that for me the "redemptive love" that passed through the passion and death of Jesus Christ, is the love that leads me to follow my conscience and to continue serving this Revolution, which is so much vilified and under attack, and in which, I think, the cause of the poor finds its concrete expression in Nicaragua. Since it is a decision of my conscience, I do not presume to present it as a model or an example. Other people may feel, also in conscience, that the demand of their faithfulness lead along other paths. For me it would be a sin before God not to follow this hard and painful way. It is rendered somewhat easier by the hope that my permanent communion with the Church and my conscientious obedience to God will vindicate the Lord of History and the Church itself before my people.

I think it will be useful to complete this personal testimony with a historical explanation, so that the readers may understand better why and how I came to be involved in the struggle of the Sandinist Front for National

Liberation, and the reasons that have sustained me for 12 years within the Nicaraguan Revolution. What I am going to say I have already publicly declared in various forms in the past.

III. The points of departure

Much has been written about the participation of priests in politics. I think that my best contribution to the debate will be simply to narrate my own experience. Our options have been taken in response to the questions and challenges of the concrete history of our countries, and only by knowing this history can our positions be understood.

Our commitment has various points of departure.

1. I start from the fact that the people of God and the masses of the poor in Latin America have had the experience of seeing Church leaders support oppressive power or enter into unwritten alliances with such powers. Our simple people have grown accustomed to seeing the Cross blessing the Oppressive Sword.

2. In our countries no real conditions have existed for the poor to be authentically represented in the sphere of power through democratic means. In my country also there have been no concrete and real democratic institutions. It is enough to point out two facts to give an idea of the world in which we have lived:

- a) more than 51% of the population was illiterate, and a high percentage of those who could read never did.

- b) for almost fifty years three members of the Somoza family were in power. Moreover, one result of the utter impoverishment and oppression, to which the great majority of the people were subjected, has been that there were not enough men and women to fill the posts of public services after the triumph of the Revolution.

3. My third point of departure is the fact that the revolutionary movements which struggle for justice in our countries are presented in the propaganda media of the more powerful nations in our area as "terrorists" or "subversives" as long as the fight continues. If they manage

to come out victorious, the same propaganda media present them as tending towards totalitarianism and militant atheism.

For all these reasons my request is that when considering the question of the political commitment of priests in Third World countries and specially in those countries where the majority profess the catholic religious faith, the universal Church should respect the missiological principle of inculturation. These cases cannot be treated in the same way as in developed countries. There is need to explore what new concrete forms the authentic option for the poor may require in those circumstances.

IV. The role of Catholic Priests in the struggle against Dictatorship

For four centuries our people have lived in misery. They were undernourished, illiterate and neglected. They worked in unjust and inhuman conditions, without means of communication, without health centers, without schools, without culture, without any participation in the destiny of the country, without the least possibility of being the makers of their own history. To these evils we must add the Somoza dictatorship which lasted half a century and which filled our country with the gravest injustice, lack of freedom and relentless, ferocious repression.

Our people have always fought. They fought in an organised and effective manner since the foundation of the Sandinist Front for National Liberation (FSLN) in 1961. Thousands of Nicaraguans were murdered during these years. But new heroes were ever coming up who fought and offered their blood to the last drop to redeem the people from its slavery, from its fear of the Pharaoh.

Meanwhile, our Church lived in peace and harmony with the oppressors. Some facts are quite significant. In Nicaragua people will never forget that during the funeral service of General Somoza Garcia, founder of the dynasty, the then Archbishop of Managua honoured the dictator with the title of "Prince of the Church".

In 1967 several leaders of the FSLN were captured and assassinated. On this occasion the Auxiliary Bishop of Mangua published an article in a Government paper in which he practically justified the repression because, according to him, these youngsters were "communists".

I shall never forget how I felt when on my return to Nicaragua in 1968, I read the first Pastoral letter of the Bishops of Nicaragua. I had already been ordained priest. Both the people's struggle and the repression were daily growing. The Pastoral letter had no theological principle to guide us in discerning the will of God in those difficult times. It only demanded that priests should wear black cassocks. Not one word about the black situation in which our people lived. With marvellous exceptions, our church lived in alliance with the Dictatorship.

In 1969 I had to leave the country for nine months, to finish my religious formation with the last phase of Jesuit training, known as the Third Probation. I asked to do it in Medellin City (Colombia), because there the training centre had been moved from a beautiful four storey building standing amidst gardens and sports fields, to a marginalised slum in the misery belt around the city of Medellin. The previous year II General Assembly of the Latin American Episcopate had taken place there. I lived those months among people suffering from hunger, unemployment and disease: they had no electricity nor any other city facilities or services. I came to love the people very deeply, and my stay with them those months marked my life for ever.

My Christian faith, my human sentiments, and all that I saw and heard brought me every day to one conclusion which sprang from the deepest core of my being: This cannot continue in this way! Such misery is quite unjust! In this situation God cannot remain neutral!

My spiritual experience among the poor confirmed the image of God which I had drawn from the Bible: God is not neutral, God listens to the cry of the oppressed and takes their cause to heart. Never did the Bible speak to me more clearly than when I read it amid the filth and misery of that slum.

In mid 1970 my training came to an end, but before coming back to my country I took an oath in front of the people of that slum in Medellin: "I shall dedicate my life to the integral liberation of the poor in Latin America, wherever I can be most useful." I began work in the Central American University (UCA) of Mangua, as Vice-Rector in charge of the students. A long night continued to cover our people: dictatorship, dependence, prison, torture, hunger, corruption, malnutrition, fear, death and violation of all human and civil rights etc. The official Catholic Church continued to live peacefully with that genocidal regime. Half a dozen priests made an effort to put into practice the new pastoral orientations outlined in the Medellin documents.

The FSLN was already known by everybody and had gained the respect and allegiance of the poor people for its courageous and clean fight for the poor and against the dictatorship. Inspired by the Medellin documents and seeking the integral liberation of the people, some of us, priests, began to take part in the struggles of our people for civil rights and freedom: marches, occupation of churches, hunger strikes, speeches in assemblies, articles in newspapers etc.

Groups of Christian students also began to take part in the struggles of the poor. Later their participation would prove to be of enormous importance.

The most significant moment of Christian participation in the people's struggle was the first occupation of the Cathedral Church. In 1970 three of us priests accompanied hundred students from the UCA in a hunger strike in the Cathedral of Mangua. We demanded that the lives of the University students imprisoned a few days earlier be respected. We demanded the right to speak with them. We demanded that, in accordance with the Nicaraguan law, the students should be freed forthwith or charged, sheeted and brought to trial within ten days.

In those days it was quite normal in Nicaragua for political prisoners to be tortured for weeks and weeks in the National Security Centers. The occupation of the

Cathedral caused a national commotion. The army surrounded the temple with great show of force. We pealed mourning bells every fifteen minutes, day and night, and announced that we would continue to toll them until justice was done and the law upheld. Large groups of people came from the main parishes of Mangua to sit in the square in support of us. Thousands came, thousands passed along in buses and cars, greeting us on the way. In three and a half days the dictator had to give in. For the first time a Christian group had taken a clear and effective public stand. There were messages of support from the Cursillos de Cristiandad, the Christian Family Movement, the Basic Communities, etc. After a few days the Nicaraguan Bishops' Conference published a pastoral letter condemning our protest. Thousands of Christians signed a respectful letter in which they explained to the Bishops that the bodies of the students rather than the stone buildings were the temples of the Holy Spirit, and that these living temples were profaned and tortured in the prison cells. But the most important part of the letter was the section which said that the people of Nicaragua had chosen a way, the way of struggle for justice, and that they, the Shepherds, were standing aside and condemning the people's movement instead of leading the way. From then onwards at all moments of the people's struggle for justice Christians would be present.

I knew that it was important for the Church not to be disqualified for the Revolution. Young people should be able to see that the Church had a concrete project of justice for the exploited. Paradoxically, the question of collaboration between revolutionaries and Christians in Nicaragua became problematic not because of the former but because of the latter. I personally knew the founder of the FSLN, Commandant-in-Chief Carlos Fonseca Amador (assassinated in 1976), and I knew his openness and his desire of collaboration with Christians. I studied the statutes of the FSLN written by him in 1969 where he speaks of religious freedom and of the support to be given to priests who work for the people. In the year 1970, I had an interview with Commandant Oscar Turcios, a member

of the National Leadership of the FSLN (assassinated in 1973), who told me:

"The important thing is not that you believe in another life, and that I, on the contrary, believe that I shall finish here. The fundamental question is whether both of us believe that we can work together for the construction of a new society."

Christian communities, and Christian youth in particular, began to take part more and more in the slow and dangerous march towards liberation. Their faith moved thousands of Nicaraguans who then committed themselves to this struggle quite naturally and spontaneously. They understood that in struggling for justice and for the poor, they were on the side of God. Thanks to them the Nicaraguan Revolution took place with the Christians in it.

When in 1973 Commandant Eduardo Contreras (assassinated in 1976) requested me to become officially involved in the work of the FSLN, I was for an instant reminded of the parable of the Good Samaritan. It seemed obvious that I could not be like the priest and the levite who passed by leaving the wounded man on the roadside. The Samaritans in Nicaragua were asking me to help them heal our wounded people. From my Christian faith, I could only give one answer: committing myself. I continued to work with the students, giving the Spiritual Exercises, directing Cursillos de Cristiandad, and keeping my Chair of Philosophy in the Autonomous National University of Nicaragua (UNAN); but I also collaborated secretly with the FSLN in its struggle for national liberation.

Our march with the people helped to bring legitimacy to their struggle through our influence as priests, through our moral demands, through our fight for unity and our message about the new humanity. We gave our full adhesion to the only concrete movement that had an authentic project of justice for our people. In it our love for the neighbour and our preferential option for the poor became concrete. There were not several projects compatible with the Christian ideal. There was only one which

could in fact win for our people the right to participate in the building of their own history. It was important to repudiate the open alliance of the official Church with the oppressive power. My formation and my studies had prepared me for teaching, for giving the Spiritual Exercises and for the sacramental ministry. The cry of the oppressed and the realities of my country led me gradually to discover other aspects of the same priestly ministry. There was no rupture in my priesthood; only, I began to stress its prophetic aspects. My option was coherent with the diverse dimensions of my priesthood. It brought to light not so much those elements that derive from the ministry in the Old Testament, but the one that derives from the Ministry of Jesus in the New Testament, namely, the prophetic aspect.

My work became more dangerous everyday since the greater part of my revolutionary activity was public. In 1970 the Somoza authorities expelled me from the Central American University (UCA) of Managua. In 1973 I participated actively in the foundation of the Revolutionary Christian Movement (MCR) which formed many cadres and leaders for the FSLN. In 1976 the leaders of the Revolution sent me to Washington to denounce the crimes and Human Rights violations of dictator Somoza before the United States Congress. On my return to my country the President of the Senate of Nicaragua proposed that I should be declared a traitor to the country. Then we founded the Nicaraguan Commission of Human Rights, etc.

A thousand details about the struggles, fears and hopes of the priests who participated in the fight of those years must remain untold for lack of space. Motivated by faith, we had often to walk in darkness; when we wanted to see and follow the Lord of History we only saw crimes and a smiling Dictator, always victorious at the end of each battle. Hope was often a dark virtue. I experienced fear, much fear, specially of torture. In spite of the order of capture that weighed over our heads we re-entered Nicaragua on the 4th of July 1978. Within two months we had to go completely underground. Then came the

September uprising, and the following year the Final Offensive. At the cost of the heroic sacrifice of 50,000 of our countrymen we came to the People's Victory on July 19th, 1979. We were not the only religious who had done something for the struggle. Other priests gave support by their preaching of the Gospel. Many religious, men and women, collaborated in many ways with the guerrillas; and thousands of Christians fought from all the trenches and barricades in the countryside and in the cities of Nicaragua. In the end in some of their writings the bishops did condemn the Dictator's violations of human rights and on several occasions took a firm stand against Somoza. But this took place in the midst of great contradictions, and when the Victory Day arrived they had never yet written a single letter in favour of the struggle of the FSLN. What is worse, they often condemned the fight of the people when in their writings they condemned violence "from wherever it comes", thus putting on the same level the unjust violence of a criminal oppressor with the legitimate and just self-defence of the oppressed people. It was only one week before the Final Offensive that the bishops justified the people's uprising.

It is important to make clear that at no moment were my decisions taken as a result of a crisis in my priestly identity. For me they were the expression of my growth as a priest who slowly discovered the prophetic dimensions of priesthood and the exigencies it carries in a country like ours. It may not be useless to add that in all the steps I took those years I consulted with my Religious Superiors and my Community and received their approval.

V. My role after the victory

a) Once the Revolution triumphed one might have opted for withdrawal from the movement and from active politics. We do not do it because we foresaw that the struggle would continue and would be difficult. Moreover, our project did not mean participation in power, it meant strengthening the possibility that the power would really remain

in the hands of the poor. We wanted also to continue our struggle for a new humanity in a new project; and to maintain the presence of Christian values in this project; and thus to show the possibility of a leftist programme which, for the first time in history, would not be anti-Christian. We knew that this historical possibility was very fragile and constantly under threat. We are a small country with only 3 million inhabitants.

b) We felt that the eyes of all Latin America were on us. We were a symbol of the Church's break with the ruling power. We did not want to disappoint our brothers and sisters. In fact the reward we reaped has been work, sacrifice, threats to life and threats of being kidnapped, and not show and privilege which normally go with the image of political power specially in developed countries.

c) On the contrary, the tasks entrusted to us have a great affinity to the tasks proper to our priestly vocation. Fifteen days after Victory Day, the leaders of the Revolution gave me the tasks of organising the Literacy Campaign. We mobilised the whole country and the greater part of our students moved to the mountains of the country, and in five months of totally dedicated work we managed to reduce the percentage of illiteracy from 51 to 12.9. This was our Second Uprising. I felt greater fulfilment as a priest in teaching my people to read than in lecturing on Plato and Aristotle to the students of the UNAN.

In this epic campaign we Christians played a very important role. In the closing ceremony of the Second Literacy Congress, my companion Carlos Carrion Cruz, Delegate of the National Direction of the FSLN to the National Literacy Campaign, said in his concluding remarks: 'It is important to stress that these days tons of paper and ink are wasted trying to convince Christians that it is not possible to be Christian and revolutionary at the same time. However, the true Christians, religious or lay, have not wasted their time on these theoretical questions. Through their outstanding participation in the Campaign they have demonstrated in practice that being Christian and revolutionary at the same time is not only possible but necessary.

When the Literacy Campaign ended the FSLN agreed to my request to work with the "Sandinist Youth 19th of July". I knew that this work could be easily unauthorised by the ecclesiastical establishment by labelling it "political activity". The fact is that the Sandinist Revolution placed a priest in a responsible position in the formation of its most precious treasure: its youth, that is, its future. As priest and as educator I had a tremendous sense of self-realisation in a work that involved 60 per cent of Nicaragua's students.

In the month of July this year I was appointed Education Minister. Miguel and Ernesto have continued to work in their respective Ministries and have accomplished something extraordinary in favour of the people. This is recognised all over the world. Fr. Edgard Parrales went as ambassador to the Organisation of American State in Washington in order to defend the justice of the Revolution.

VI. Final Reflexions

a) We are conscious of the fact that we represent an exceptional and frontier case outside the normal practice legitimately admitted by the Church. We do not claim that our case is the beginning of a generalised practice, nor do we hope that in the revolutions now in gestation in Latin America priests will occupy ministerial positions in the Government. The permission to remain at our posts that we got from the Bishops' Conference in June 1981 is an exception based on the situation of emergency in which we Nicaraguans find ourselves after the war of liberation.

b) But in this frontier situation we fulfil an apostolic mission quite in line with our priesthood, since ours is a leadership function and a service of a faith in the midst of a secular historical movement. We have tried to help the movement to avoid becoming anti-religious or anti-Christian, and to be authentically "revolutionary", human in its Revolution, truly at the service of the poor.

c) We should realise that what is at stake is not just a cannon of the code. What is at stake is the faith's possibi-

lity of becoming incarnate in the option for the poor, an option which political powers all over the world seek to outlaw.

d) Nobody can be unaware of the significance for the nation's future of the fact that the leaders of its Revolution recognise publicly the importance of Christian participation in it. In an official communique from the National Direction of the FSLN about Religion, published on October 7th, 1980, we read: "Christians have been an integral part of our revolutionary history to a degree without precedent in any revolutionary movement of Latin America and probably of the world."

e) I believe that in Nicaragua we must be allowed to say a word about Jesus Christ through our deeds, through our life-witness, and through our service of animating and accompanying Christians who are within the historical process. The process itself reveals to us and teaches us the action of the Spirit of Jesus.

I have shared with you my personal witness and my ecclesial experience which to me has been very painful. From my point of view and from my personal experience it is possible for me to live simultaneously in fidelity to the church as Jesuit and priest and to be dedicated to the service of the poor of Nicaragua within the people's Sandinist Revolution. However, I am not allowed to unite these two great loves of my life — in reality they are not two but one (Mt 25).

I conclude in faith, hope and Christian love, I hope to have responded despite all my deficiencies, to the demands which the Lord and my people make on my life. Once again I ask for your prayer and solidarity in action.

M. Fernando Cardenal

Death and Life

Hope is bound up with human life. It is a common experience and a universal attitude. It lies at the heart of all human plans and activities. The farmer ploughs, sows, weeds and waits. The hope of the harvest to come is the meaning of his toil. It energizes him, gives unity to his actions, and sustains life. In its absence would the farmer still plough and sow? Hardly, unless he is off his mind. In its presence, however, he is prepared to spend his time, lose precious measures of paddy to the loosened soil, buy manure, sweat and tire — all to make a dream come true. It is a hope-dream glowing in the heart of young lovers, that brings them closer to each other and makes them work together and share life and rear a family. Think of the rainbow hopes of the young woman who feels for the first time the stirring of new life in her womb; or of the hope of the boy taking the trouble to go to school and learn, and the hope of his parents. There is no need to multiply examples. Hope is the commonest of experiences and, as Ernst Bloch describes it, "the most human of all emotions". Only men and women can experience it¹. Some hopes are clear and well defined. Others are sublime and sophisticated. But all of them are rooted in, and grow out of, "that tacit hopefulness which seems to be diffused through all human existing and acting"².

Hope is vital. If it dies life snaps. Where hope perishes people end their life either lose their mind, or drift aimless and rudderless. Reasons are not wanting to lose heart, to give up hoping, to despair. Enough to see the utter, unutterable poverty, misery and hunger in one or ano-

1. E. Bloch, *Philosophische Grundfragen, Zur Ontologie des Noch-Nicht-Sein*, (Frankfurt, 1961) quoted in G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York, 1971) p. 216

2. J. Macquarrie, *Christian Hope* (London, 1978) p. 4

ther of our numberless slums and villages. Enough to recall the age old oppression of Harijans, their untold humiliation and deprivation, and the war now being fought to block their paths, to crush the new buds of freedom and hope that have appeared on their horizon, and to keep them as bonded labour and free brothels for the joy and glory of India's upper classes and castes. Or India's child labourers. Or the degradation of our women who are so easily ignored, insulted, sold, raped, killed or tucked away. Or the corruption, rot and decay in high places and low. Or the commercialisation of religion and spirituality. Or the organized massacres like those in Delhi and Kanpur in November 1984. Or the police atrocities, cruelties and excesses galore; the tens of thousands of undertrials forgotten behind bars for years; the manifold gap between the landless poor and the great landlords — money lenders who are the real power in rural India whom formal government power duly fears and serves; the lopsided priorities of the ruling class with Asiad games and summit conferences and TV carnivals while tens of thousands of villages lack clean drinking water and millions lack a simple roof over their heads and half the population is under-nourished. A recent report by Ramesh Menon points to 6,000 villages of Rajasthan where water does not give life but brings disease and death. An introduction to the report says that "Fluorosis, a slowly debilitating disease that is caused by an excess of fluoride in drinking water, has already permanently crippled over 3.5 lakh inhabitants of the desert belt, and, with no help coming from the government, it looks like the deadly disease going to cripple several more". Menon says that "during election time come hopes of health and during the last polls, the local candidates brought in shining new pipes to convince gullible villagers of their promises of potable water. But elections came and went" and the unused pipes still glimmer in the sun. All that the people ask from the government by way of development is clean drinking water, and that is what the wretched peasants are never likely to get from the government".

3. Ramesh Menon, Crippling Scourge, in *India Today* of May 5, 1985 pp. 140-142

3.5 lakh victims are more than in Bhopal; who shall sue whom for compensation and in what court? One could go on enumerating grounds for despair.

But the surprising fact is that mankind has refused to succumb to despair. Somewhere in the human spirit are resources which equip women and men to cope with the tragic in history. Young people see clearly how their elders have for ages made a mess of love and marriage, and economics and politics and the mystery of the earth. Yet with clear eyes they go ahead to love and marry and work and relate, confident against centuries of evidence to the contrary that they are going to make a success of it all, they are going to build a new world. Hope is incurable, it is basic to human existence. Sometimes it speaks a religious language, sometimes a secular idiom. The Hindu hopes for *Mokṣa*, the final release from *Samsāra* and the power of *Karma*. He hopes also to join his ancestors and be with his brothers. On short term he hopes for full life here with needs and desires met (*Kāma*), with prosperity and resources in abundance (*Artha*) and a readiness to use them properly and leave them when the time comes (*Dharma*). The Christian lives by the hope of heaven, or better, by the hope of the promised and coming Kingdom of God; the new Earth, the new Age of justice and peace, the realm of the Resurrection and the sphere of the Spirit, and the new Community of God's People with God in their midst making all things new, abolishing death and wiping every tear from every eye. Secular humanists and Marx and his followers in particular live on hope too. The hope of overcoming all alienation of human beings from one another and from nature; the hope of putting an end to every sort of inequality and exploitation by restructuring society's economic base; the hope of a new community of free and equal people who, with their needs met, will have time for higher human pursuits; the hope of a community in which a human being's highest need will be other human beings; the hope of thus inaugurating and, living in, an authentic human history. Hope is thus a factor common and central to the religious

and to the secular scheme of life. If indeed *Mokṣa* is impossible, Hinduism makes little sense. If the Kingdom of God is an idle myth Christianity evaporates. If the classless society is an illusion, Marxist socialism collapses.

Hoping against hope

Hope is rarely if ever found in its purity, separated and marked off clearly from the realms of hopelessness. What we lift from the mine of history is a composite ore. Smelt it as best we may, we still find the finest hope inset in hopelessness and hopelessness in hope. There is a dialectic of the two as there is of death and life. We recall Jesus' brief poetic parable of the grain of wheat which must embrace death in order to bring forth the harvest of a new life now held in confinement within it. We stand at the confluence of death and life, of despair and hope. The sweet and the bitter waters flow together and emerge from each other, and are ever tumbling one over the other. We need daily to churn the ocean of life and discern the elements of hope and the movements of life, and side with these, and nurse them to maturity while combating the hopelessness in which hope is often embedded. To hope is to be engaged in this daily struggle against the forces of despair and death. Hope has to be organized and built brick by brick. A doctor's hope for his patient is exercised and made real in the treatment he gives him or her. The architect's hope for the house is concretised in the laying of bricks and the spreading of mortar. Hope is not a star that appears on a sudden in full splendour on the distant horizon. It grows with and within the simple services of love and life that we render to one another day after day. As it grows it exerts force against structures of oppression and strives for social transformation. The life of the people who live on hope, and the praxis of the suffering masses who refuse to give in to despair show that hope is not facile optimism. The changes in attitudes and structures which we want do not happen quickly. Oppression persists. Suffering continues and multiplies. New prospects of destruction keep opening up. The Cross is there always

and the nails and the scourging and the insult. The poor have been clinging to the Cross. By some deep divine human instinct they seem to know that the Resurrection springs from the heart of the Cross, that Life streams out of the open side of the Crucified.

Hope consists in hoping against hope (Rom 4:18) in situations of hopelessness like that of Abraham. This man put his trust in God and hoped for a son in spite of his wife's barrenness and advanced age. In the normal run of things, a child to this couple was a clear, simple, unquestionable impossibility. In this impossibility God plants his promise, and in that word Abraham anchors his heart and his future. For Paul, Sarah and Abraham were as good as dead in so far as child-bearing was concerned. But then God intervenes to call forth life from the bosom of death, to raise the dead to life. For Paul this act of God, this story, is a parable; it is a prophecy and a promise of the resurrection of Jesus which is the inauguration of the resurrection of all women and men, of the process of opening all wombs and tombs, of the lifting up of all who have been deprived of life and thrust into graves of wretched, subhuman existence, like the existence of those whose stories are told in this issue of *Jeevadhara*, or of those whom we see with horror and shame and dismay in the slums of Calcutta and Bombay, or of the Dalits, the undertrials, the unemployed.

Arun Shourie has ably illustrated this truth in an analysis of recent Indian history⁴. In the first place Shourie admits that we are rightly outraged by the growth of evil in our national life and all its structures and arrangements, but denies that our pessimism and despair are justified. These arise from a misunderstanding of the nature of decay as well as from personal vanity which exaggerates our own roles in effecting change. It is important to remember that break-down of values, the onset of decay and the collapse of the system do not hapen all on a

4. A Shourie, Reasons for Hope, *Indian Express Magazine*, August 15, 1982

sudden, nor due to the wrongdoing of one man or two. The collapse is the result of a long process in which cell after cell got infected; it is the result of the collaboration of one, a few, many, most of us. If this is understood what emerges is not despondency but a challenge.

Secondly, history is not stagnant, society is not static. Changes intrude, some of which counter the rot. For instance untouchability is undermined more by city-life, public transport system and the employment schemes of a secular government than by Gandhiji's fasts. The experience of technology, of the freedom movement, and of adult franchise etc. have helped develop an awareness that, like nature, society too can be manipulated and restructured. People have also learned that they have a right to shape society to serve their needs and interests. That the poor, illiterate voters have a new perception of rulers as servants of the public weal and not self-serving autocrats is shown by the fact that in successive elections they have thrown out two thirds of the sitting legislators who sought re-election. "Even those events which in themselves are horrible often testify to a sea-change for the better." Thakurs in U.P, and Bihar have shot down Harijans. We scream about it, rightly; but Shourie points out that "the resort to guns itself testifies to new stirrings among Harijans, to the fact that for the first time in centuries, some among them have realised that they too have rights, that they too are entitled to minimum wages, to some land in the village common". The press has come to devote a great deal of space and effort to socially relevant issues which was not the case some 20 years ago. Shourie's position is that despair has no place, for the very decay of system is generating new energy and nourishing new sprouts of far greater promise. Shourie says: "Thus there is all round progress. Much that is horrible is a result of this progress. And now a stage has arrived in which the situation becomes clearer by the week to a larger and larger number of people."

Thirdly, there are the dissenters, the men and women who refuse to go along, who come from a culture

and bring a set of values which are entirely different from those of the ruling elite and the politicians. People like Jaya Prakash, Acharya Kripalani, Mahatma Gandhi, K. F. Rustamji, P. S. Appu and many others. They see the iniquities of the existing arrangements and risk everything to overturn them. Success as defined by the system is not theirs. Such success they scorn. The service these dissenters render to the nations is invaluable. It includes the following: (a) These marginal people keep alive "the set of values around which the new society will be built", or they forge it afresh. (b) They help "crystalise for the people the latter's experience". (c) They help "organise the group or the movement that will deliver the new society". (d) By the quality of their person, life and engagement they send out to the nation the important signal that there is a better world and a better way. (e) And finally they send out a second, equally important signal that "there are individuals who will put themselves out, who will take risks, who will suffer to see that the better world is realised, to see that the better way prevails". Shourie reminds us that "It is an error therefore to be discouraged at a stage of decay by the conduct of the eminent. Their conduct is precisely the conduct that one would expect from the beneficiaries of arrangements as they are, of the drift as it is. Look instead at the marginal men: are they not around, does their number not grow, do they let go?"

Fourthly, there are the movements. We recall past movements, romanticize them and look upon movements as the ultimate means to right all wrongs. But we forget the reality and limitations of movements. The satyagrahas, for instance, were localised and never covered the whole subcontinent. Only a few joined them.

In Shourie's words, "The movement as a whole failed to achieve a number of its most important objectives: the eradication of untouchability, temperance, communal harmony, political freedom for a united India, to say nothing of Gandhiji's real objective — that of forging an alternative to western civilization." But that is no reason for dejection. Move-

ments are signs of hope if we remember their real functions. (a) They unmask a regime, and show up a government's real interests, alignments and fears. Ideas of divine right to rule explode. (b) They help people realise how the people are stronger than they think and the rulers weaker. (c) They reveal to the people the help each one of them is giving the rulers against their own interests. (d) They reverse the norms and values of society, and disclose alternatives. Since 1920-21 British titles and medals became badges of shame while having been to jail as a satyagrahi became a mark of honour. (e) They give the people an opportunity to see who will suffer for the good of the people, and how new leadership is forging outside the official structures. In this fashion decades of movements build up a new political culture signalling hope.

Hopelessness and hope thus grew intertwined in our history. Hope keeps emerging out of hopeless conditions. The more desperate the situation and the deeper the decay, the more vigorous and abundant the shoots of hope. The clearer the flames of hope that shoot up the uglier shows up the rot. That leads us to the perception of a certain dimension of human history, to an aspect of its mystery. In our history sin abounds; sin, the rot, the decay, the despair. But when sin abounds grace abounds the more (Rom 5:15-21), and where despair rules Hope emerges to conquer. The memory of the future lodged in its heart enables history continually to transcend the confusion of the hour and the repeated break-down. Hope guides life's chariot through the night and the day, through victory and defeat towards Love and Life.

Birth process of hope

The author of the book of Exodus in the Old Testament makes a similar analysis of the beginnings of Hebrew history and traces the birth and growth of hope through a process of hardening oppression. Here hopelessness and hope not only alternate but dialectically inter-relate. As the hope of liberation dawns the night of oppression deepens. Here we shall mark oppression with an A and hope with a B.

A. The story begins with an account of oppression. Pharaoh used the Hebrews, Asians, as slave labour in the construction of frontier fortresses and store-cities to prevent fresh invasions and emigrations from Asia. He "put slave-drivers over them to wear them down under heavy loads." (1:8-11)

B. Extra work however did not affect the robustness of life of these sturdy peasants. The fact is that "the more they were crushed, the more they increased and spread, and men came to dread the sons of Israel" (1: 12).

A. Therefore "the Egyptians forced them into slavery, and made their life unbearable with hard labour". And death was added to slavery and oppression; death to their children, death to their hope and their future. A form of oppression which would cut off their history and shatter their spirit and crush them under a load of grief. The Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah were ordered to kill baby boys at birth (1:13-16).

B. But the midwives proved to be dissenters. They refused to go along. They have a different vision and live by a different set of values. They represent the hope of a culture of life which counters the empire's culture of death. And here for the first time God is named in connection with dissent, disobedience and option for life. "But the midwives were God-fearing: they disobeyed the command of the king of Egypt and let the boys live." And with the boys they let hope live. They have an answer to the king which is at once honest and evasive, and defiant in effect. It is right and significant that women standing close to life, and handling life's beginnings should be also the bearers of hope and the mothers of a counter-culture which some day would come to blossom in Mary of Nazareth, and especially in her Son, Jesus.

A. So the king turned to his subjects (and not to Hebrew women) and commanded them to "throw all the boys born to the Hebrews into the river". Death wrestling with life, and hopelessness and hope locked in mortal combat (1:32).

B1. Pharaoh and death are defeated once more, and once again by a conspiracy of women. The women managed to save a life and preserve a seed of hope. Baby Moses' mother kept him hidden for three months; she then put him in a papyrus basket and laid the basket among the reeds at the river side; and got his sister to keep watch from a distance. Hope in their hearts that the baby would somehow be preserved. Pharaoh's daughter finds the child, makes it her own, entrusts it for nursing to its own mother though the princess did not know this particular relationship (2:1-9).

B2. When the child grew up he was brought to Pharaoh's daughter "who treated him like a son" (2:10). There in the palace Moses grew up and learned "all the wisdom of the Egyptians and became a man with power both in his speech and in his actions" (Acts 7:22). The irony of the situation and its dialectics must not be lost on us. The establishment (for the Hebrews) of despair and death itself fosters and equips the man who (for the Hebrews at least) will end that establishment and set afoot a movement of life and hope. To paraphrase Hegel and Marx, the oppressive system drives itself towards its own dissolution by producing the oppressed and the slave; by producing these it pronounces the sentence of execution on itself. The oppressed and the slave execute that sentence and, in so doing, brings about their own and humanity's redemption⁵. The dialectical unity of opposites is illustrated in this episode of Pharaoh's daughter bringing up and educating in Pharaoh's palace at his expense the future fighter of Pharaoh.

B3. Now the light nursed in the palace seeks to reach out into the darkness beyond. "Moses, a man by now, sets out to visit his countrymen" (2. 11).

5. K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works*, vol 4 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1975) pp. 36-37; K. Marx, *Early Writings* (Penguin, 1975) P. 256; G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* tr. by A. V. Miller (O. U. P., 1977) pp. 117-118; as referred to in Nicholas Lash, *A Matter of Hope* (London 1981) pp. 243-249

AB. Moses saw "what a hard life they were having. He saw an Egyptian strike a Hebrew, one of his countrymen." "So he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (2:11-12). The struggle between hope and despair is no longer hidden. It is becoming historical and dramatic.

ABA. The following day there was a fight between two Hebrews. When slaves oppress each other what hope is left for them? Moses intervened; his arbitration was rejected. "Who appointed you to be prince over us? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" The murder had come to light. Moses was afraid. He fled and made for the land of Midian (2:13-15). Hope flickered for a moment and then went out.

B. Then came the great surprise. The intervention of God. The revelation of Hope and the decisive turn in Hope's Long March. God identifies himself with the afflictions and aspirations of the oppressed. Their agony assumed by God now becomes a mother of hope instead of being a source of despair. Moses' own burning pain and flaming anger too are assumed and transmuted into a place of encounter with a God who challenges the enslaved to struggle for freedom and a future. Henceforth therefore God will be the ultimate hope of overcoming oppression and building a new earth (3:1-18). Moses, commissioned to lead the struggle, returns to Egypt.

A. Pharaoh would not listen to Moses' message. He replied with imposition of fresh burdens on the people. "Make these men work harder than ever." The slave-drivers harassed the people and flogged their foremen, who in their turn blamed Moses for the dilemma in which they found themselves (5:1-23). The path of hope is by no means plain.

AB. The story of the ten plagues illustrates in the most telling manner the unending tussle between despair and hope or death and life in our history. Hope is costly and its birth can be a long and painful process (7:14-12:34).

B. But finally hope came to blossom. It had been growing through all the painful vicissitudes of the people's

life. And now the people left Rameses for Succoth and the land of promise. And beyond the sea they celebrated their freedom in song and dance (ch. 15).

We need not pursue the story further. The pattern revealed here does not end with the crossing of the Reed Sea and the closing steps of the dance. All along the way the temptation to return to Egypt, to barter freedom for food, and to live in the past would dog their steps. The rest of the Bible is the story of the struggle against these temptations and the striving for the new, the free and the future on the part of Moses, the prophets, Jesus Christ and his friends.

Hope of the poor

Hope looks towards the future. It orients us towards the better that is yet to be. It holds on to the vision of a fuller life and empowers us to struggle for it. Hope and struggle go together. In the words of McAfee Brown, "To struggle without hope would be futile, leading to cynicism and despair; to hope without struggling would be irrelevant, cheap and self-defeating. But to struggle while affirming hope is to have a future and to be empowered by it."⁶

True. But there are people who have no future, who cannot think of one, who are unable to look beyond today. People whose sight has been shortened; the wings of whose soul have been broken. Their imagination and aspiration have not flown for centuries beyond the cage and the confinement of this one day and its bare necessities. They have memories of the past. "I went hungry all my childhood" "As a young girl, I was raped by the landlord's son." "Once we lived in the forest, we had land, and there never was a problem about material to build with." The past has bequeathed no promise. They can scarcely talk about a future. Or, if there is a future it is usually brief: to be able to calculate one's wages; to

6. R. McAfee Brown in his Preface to G. Gutierrez' *The Power of the Poor in History* (New York 1983) p. xiii.

earn ten rupees a day; to buy some clothes for our children. Today, each day, is what they look after. Is that hope? ⁷

It is. It takes courage to live each single day, to work and receive a pittance in return, to boil a handful of rice or, what is worse, a handful of crippling poisonous *kesari dhal*, and to agree to live even for a day. It takes courage to marry, to bring a child into the world, to undertake to feed it and help it grow. There is no reason why the majority of Harijans, for instance, should continue to exist in such subhuman misery and humiliation for the sole benefit of their upper caste oppressors who use them with cruelty and cunning and discard them with scorn, and treat them as if they were of far smaller worth than the meanest animal. Why have they continued to live? Why did they not commit mass suicide centuries ago, leaving the Touchables to deal with their own filth and the carcasses of their cows? The Untouchables could have had the last laugh and left untouchability's authors and pedlars to stew in their own juice. Someone has said that the only real philosophical problem is why humankind has not committed total mass suicide long ago. The more perplexing philosophical problem is why the Untouchables of India have not done so. Perhaps the oppressed themselves have the answer; and the answer is enshrined in the very fact of their survival and their toil. There we can read that for them life is worthwhile and precious, however broken and untidy the social vessels that bear it. Life is a welcome gift, the people around are dear, their companionship is a treasure, and God encompasses the world and gives meaning to our humiliation and hunger, and he gathers our little days and holds them in his hands. That is hope.

Their hope is life now and here. Its focus is the present and not the future. Is not such hope too short-term to last? It may sustain existence for a while; but will it

7. See the contributions of M. Sujita and M. Kalathil in this issue of *Jeevadhara*

not become weary soon? Is it not the hope of the Resurrection that will really keep us going?⁸. Yet it is a fact anybody may see and touch that this hope consisting in love of life reduced to its minimum has not been too short-lived. It has lasted for centuries and stood the severest tests and refused to give up. It may be that the tenacious faith of the poor in life has some profound relationship to faith in the Resurrection. It may be that faith in life is not really different from the Resurrection faith. The Resurrection must be understood not just in terms of individual salvation but in terms of the realization of the Kingdom on earth and the transformation of humankind and of the cosmos. This perspective too is a hidden dimension of the people's hope in life.

But the Resurrection does not lie wholly and exclusively in the future. The judgment is coming, and is now, already here. That is true of the resurrection too. It is happening now and is in process where life is affirmed and loved against a dozen reasons which would persuade one to disown it and smash it. Those who believe, those who love, have passed from death to life (Jn 5:24; 1Jn 3:14). The Resurrection happens where people continually break open the tomb of their egotism and reach out to one another in simple love and compassion and sharing of the few grains they have of salt and rice. The Resurrection has been happening and its power operating where all the cruelty and contempt in the world have not been allowed to crush the people's zest for life, love for children and taste for joy and dance. In this affirmation of life, the future and the present, the eternal and the temporal, heaven and earth are no longer separated from one another⁹. "Eternity is something tangibly present in every fleeting fraction of time...Every second of time is, in its fulness and density, the equal of eternity itself."¹⁰ In situations

8. J. M. Gonzalez Ruiz, Conversation with T. Cabestrero, *Faith Conversations with Contemporary Theologians* (New York 1980) p. 93

9. John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God* (London 1972) p. 75

10. N. Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope* (New York 1972) p. 143

like that of prison cells, in situations like that of the Harijans and the poor, the "presence of Christ and the expectation of Christ are one."¹¹

With hope goes struggle. But the poor do not struggle. They are usually passive. They exist; they do not resist oppression. "Two days after coming here, the landlord took me forcibly to his house and used me for his pleasure and no one raised their voice against him."¹² Many lack a sense of their own dignity and an awareness of their rights. 'We are nothing.' Dominant class culture and subservient religion have conspired to breed in the poor a deep belief in their own worthlessness. They have conspired also to beguile them into an attitude of fatalism. "Such is our *karma*; so is the script on our skull; it is the will of God; God took our child" (which actually died of starvation, as a thousand children daily die in Brazil and fifteen million every year in India). The poor have no understanding of social mechanisms. They believe poverty is natural; it has always been there, it will be there always. They have no idea of social change beyond a slight increase in wages. There is no thought nor plan of struggle for their own liberation and for the construction of a different and better world. The poor are passive.

Yes. But in order to struggle you need to survive. This is what they are doing. Maybe, managing to survive so long without coming to the point of struggle is a mistake. They should not have survived except in terms of equality and freedom or in terms of struggle for freedom and equality. They should not have survived merely to be unpaid labour and convenient objects of pleasure for the Touchables and the Rich. They should have fought and won or perished gloriously. Be that as it may, the fact is

11. Rolond de Pury, *Journal from My Cell* (New York 1946) p. 23. This and the two references just above are from citations made by Paul S. Minear, *Theology - Vocation or Profession?* In C.S. Song, (ed.) *Doing Theology Today* (Madras 1976) pp. 1-3:

12. See contribution by M. Sujita in this issue.

that the poor have survived, and survival is no easy matter. Survival means struggle. It means doing battle day after day against overwhelming forces of death. If all struggle is yoked to hope, this incessant, perennial, centuries-old daily struggle enshrines the presence, however hidden, of a mighty hope. The poor are the people of hope, the people of the future, whom God entrusts with his Kingdom. Women and men capable of silent resistance and sustained action without fanfare.

They have not only survived, but survived with sanity. Look at the quiet dignity and self-possession of a Karma Devi who believes sincerely that she lacks nothing because her hut leaks less than other huts and because her husband will return from work and will bring some rice and potatoes for their supper. Contemplate the 25 year old Manilal in jail: a man without bitterness or guile, balanced and authentic, healthy and positive in his responses to realities of life. Think of the Oraons' unbeaten love of life and human companionship, or the young Harijans who love a good story and who enthuse over rain in the morning. The poor can laugh and celebrate life, content with the little they have. What matters is not how much they have, but what or who they are together and to one another. Their joy is puzzling and threatening. It marks a different culture from the culture of grab and greed and private conspicuous consumption. It subverts the culture of injustice and oppression. The sanity of the poor is a judgment upon insane and savage civilizations of star wars and stock-piles of nuclear kill power.

The poor have survived not only with sanity but with freedom. Sure, they are an oppressed and unfree lot. Their socio-economic fetters have yet to be smashed. Some day they will smash them themselves. In the meantime the poor are free to live and love and be human. They have not yet become wholly enslaved to consumerism, that insatiable craving for many things even when the meaning of these things is not clear, even when their dehumanising effect is felt. The poor are still more of

person than thing. Their central concern is people, not merchandise. For them human relationships are more than accumulation of luxury and power-puff. The poor are alienated in many ways, and yet there is a fundamental freedom in them by which they seek to be and remain themselves and to belong together and to one another. That is why they can be the beginnings of the free future.

To the fact of survival through basic struggle with sanity and freedom must be added the fact of endurance. In some circumstances endurance is a form of struggle. Not only is it the only form of struggle possible in circumstances like prisons and concentration camps and the life-conditions of Dalits; it is also a valid and necessary form of struggle. Endurance deepens and strengthens the spirit and adds to clarity of vision and to insights into reality. It radiates a power that serves to brace others too to uncompromising commitment. It also unnerves the oppressor and unmasks his system, for it belongs to a different world of values and subverts his culture of thingness, pleasure and power. Endurance tempers the entire group for sure and effective human action on behalf of freedom, justice and love.

All this points to a substantial measure of strength of mind and heart building up among the oppressed people. A strength different from that of money and muscle. A human strength capable of appreciating life and putting up sustained resistance to death. A great deal of spiritual force and quiet militancy has thus become accumulated in the history of the poor. This strength is a major part of the hope of history. Tomorrow's new humanity has here some of its secure foundations.

At any rate the age of passivity is passing. The poor are walking up, irrupting into history and making their existence known, their presence felt and their voice heard. Many factors have contributed to the onset of this sea-change: the growth of cities, industrialisation, new humanism triggered by Hindu revival, Gandhism and Christianity, multiple social mobility, but above all the Breath

of God blowing through history inviting and effecting change. Hope is not only being conceived but enacted. From being an attitude and stance it is becoming a historical movement. The Dalits are organising themselves and telling their stories and singing their songs full of suffering, anger, tears and revolt. They have begun to say No to oppression and to challenge the system. They insist on being respected and heard, on being equal and free. Group after group is realizing their united power; others are still powerless but not passive. When eight year old Tetari, thrown out of her class by high caste children because "she was a dirty stupid Musahar girl", swore that she would never go to school again nor send her children when she would be having them, she was not being passive nor naive; she was revolting against the system and rejecting the rot root and branch. The path to the nation's finer future leads through this child's wrath. Angry Tetaris are India's hope for tomorrow. The future is assured when Harijan women become articulate and say with Shankuri Musamat, "Now we are somebody". And still more so when Chandu Virom Vasava, a hunted Harijan president of a panchayat declares, "I do not despair of success; we will return..."¹³ The power of such words is like the power of the joy of Mary, the Mother of Jesus — a joy she expressed in a song of revolt and hope and social reversals (Luke 1:46-55).

But the reversals are not yet. The thrones still stand, the rich are full, the poor are trodden in the dust and hungry stomachs are empty. Therefore God in Christ identifies with the people in their suffering. In their Passion the true God shows himself as active to overcome death, to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things and to raise all the crucified of our land and all lands to new life and to power over history. Among them and with them God suffers and achieves his own resurrection and liberation which cannot be brought about apart from

13. See contribution by M. Sujita, P. Manthara and M. Kalathil in this issue

the liberation and resurrection of the people. The people wait on the Cross and endure; so does God with them. There in the heart of the Cross gather and build up forces of the new life which when ripe will explode into the culture of the Resurrection and the New Age.

conclusion

The poor are a reservoir of hope, an untapped source of compressed spiritual energy processed and stored away through centuries of existence of suffering, love of life and quiet resistance to death and despair. Implied in all this is faith-hope in the One who is Life and the Source of Life, and Victor over death. Along with this faith the poor have been bearing upon their heart the shame of the world's heartlessness and the wounds inflicted by its brutality. Hope has made them ready, even eager, for change. Talk about change is rare and fierce clinging to the present and to familiar sorrows in order to survive is the rule. Nevertheless they are predisposed to alternative life-style and social structuring because they have no stakes in the given system, they have nothing to lose but their chains and the scorn of the wealthy.

The poor are open to God's surprises and to the possibilities wrapped up in divine promises. They are willing to move out and march into the unknown, the new, the future which God holds in their hearts and hands. God's promise to the poor is the Kingdom of justice, love and peace; God's promise is wholeness of life in community. His promise is the uplifting of the lowly which happens together with the dethroning of the powerful. His promise is bread to the hungry and strength to those who mourn. His promise, finally, is his Spirit, his own presence and companionship, his own Self. His presence, friendship and Self are inseparably bound up with, and incarnate in, the reality of the poor and the community of the wretched of the earth. It is on these foundations that hope rests and the future rises. But the hoped for future cannot begin to be historical reality except through struggle against the power of inertia and the forces of death. Hope

therefore means much waiting and striving, risk-taking and painful coming to birth. Hope is like the seed of which Jesus spoke:

"Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." (Jn 12:24)

Hope is also like the woman, Jesus remembered on the eve of his own passion:

"A woman in childbirth suffers, because her time has come; but when she has given birth to the child she forgets the suffering in her joy that a man has been born into the world." (Jn 16:21)

So it is that

"The seed that stirs in the woman's womb and the rice with which the mother fills the bowl speak volumes about the hope of humanity in a world of misery and suffering. I am sure God wants us Christians to share in that seed of hope stirring in the womb of humanity. And perhaps he is calling us to be a bowl of the rice of hope and life to those struggling to be free from fear and despair." ¹⁴

Vidyajyoti
Delhi - 110 054

Samuel Rayan

14. C. - S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, (New York 1979) p. 175